



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Grapes and Wrath"**
Comment: *The image of the grapevine occurs frequently in Scripture. Today's readings include two examples.*
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament	Isaiah 5:1-7
Epistle	Philippians 3:14-21
Gospel	Matthew 21:33-43

Learning a foreign language can present some amusing situations. I had a Swedish friend who once told me that his favorite American novel was John Steinbeck's Depression-era work, "The Wrath of Grapes." I laughed at that, but have come to realize that the image works either way. Grapes are certainly a mixed symbol to use: they are a sign of abundance, but also intoxication; they are a source of vitamins, but have to be destroyed in order to be useful. The "grapes of wrath" worked for Steinbeck, the way it did for the author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and for the original writer who used the image, the prophet Jeremiah. And the "wrath of grapes" works too: the image of fruit being crushed in stone vats to produce the blood-like juice that would become wine.

But grapes are also a sign of God's providence. A big bunch of grapes was the *pasalubong* that the Israelites scouts brought back to prove that the Promised Land was everything they had been promised it would be. Indeed, two men carrying a huge cluster of grapes is still the logo for the Israeli tourist board. The Jewish people itself was said to be a vine transplanted by God to Canaan where it would be blessed not only with milk and honey, but also with the fruit of the vine. A golden cluster of grapes is described as hanging over the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem, and

when Jesus needed an example for the relationship between himself and those who would be his followers, he might well have pointed to it while saying, "I am the *true* vine." By the way, that's why I chose the grapevine as the motif for our new church doors.

So valuable are grapes in the world of the bible that they are often coveted and are the cause of a lot of trouble. Noah is said to have been the first vintner, and the first recorded drunk. The King of Israel coveted Naboth's vineyard, and was punished for it. And today we hear about trouble over tenant farmers in a theoretical field owned by God.

In the Old Testament, in today's reading from the early part of the book of the Prophet Isaiah, we hear the famous "Song of the Vineyard" and its sad lament for the harvest of wild, sour grapes that are unexpectedly produced. It prompts an angry response on the part of the farmer who destroys the entire operation in disgust. This is a parable of Israel's faithlessness and eventual destruction.

Jesus uses the same example of the vineyard as the sign of something precious and cared for that also leads to terrible disappointment. He goes to great length to describe how a vineyard is prepared and guarded. Again, the vine becomes the image of the Kingdom God had prepared for the Jewish people. But, says Jesus, this is a wonderful inheritance that they squandered by abusing those sent by the owner and even killing his son. The point is clear: if the Jews aren't bothered to be faithful to God, then perhaps Christians will be.

But we are in no position to be smug about this story or condescending to our spiritual forebears the Jews. The story is not included in the Sunday readings to make us feel self-satisfied, but as a warning. If the kingdom can be taken even from the Chosen People, then it can be taken from us, too. We are assured that the Church of God will stand up to any of the threats of its enemies, either Satan or humankind. But we are not told that individual groups, denominations or parishes, are given the same guarantee. For some, the demise of Holy Trinity might be as inconsequential as calmly switching to Union Church or some other congregation

closer to home. For others, it would mark the end of a witness to the Gospel in a stable, historical and traditional framework that would be very hard to reproduce elsewhere. But a church that is not faithful, or which doesn't produce active witness and vital members is doomed, and ought to be doomed.

The final statement is most telling: "The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." It is a grape-colored warning given to Episcopalians, Catholics and Lutherans and just about anybody else who has responded to the call to follow Christ, to live a life worthy of his teachings, and to commit themselves to God's plan. To do otherwise is to risk both the grapes of wrath, and the "wrath of grapes."