

Pentecost XXI (Proper 22a)

Is 5.1-7; Mt 21.33-43

October 5, 2008

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In every land, in every culture and in every time, there have been sad, sad songs. Songs of heartbreak and lost love. Of betrayal and revenge. Of missed opportunities and trains that have left the station. The list is **painfully** endless!

I don't remember who it was, but some pundit once offered the opinion that the perfect country song contained the same elements: *mothers, dogs, death and prison*. An old college roommate, following that formula, actually wrote a country song that began *Christmas the dog died, Ma went to prison...*

Try as I might, I have never been able to forget it...(I'll sing it for you sometime if you'd like to hear it!)

But of all the sad, sad songs, that have ever been written... the good ones and the bad ones... the saccharine and sentimental... or the serious and sublime... there has never been a song quite so filled with longing and pathos as the one the prophet Isaiah has given us this morning.

It is a story of Israel's election as the chosen and beloved of God... and God himself is the scorned lover this heartbreaking lament:

Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard.

The song tells of God's lavish care. His fastidious attention to detail. His hopes and dreams and aspirations.

And yet, for all his love and attention and self-sacrifice, his beloved is unfaithful. She produces the wild grapes of her adultery.

And the closing lines are particularly painful. They describe the moment of sudden reversal in which our spirits which have been light as a feather one minute... are suddenly filled with anguish too deep for words.

A soldier rejoices to receive a letter from his fiancée, eagerly ripping it open... only to read its "Dear John" contents...

A girl who wishes to be "home" more than anything else in the whole world... rounds the curve in the road expecting to catch a glimpse of happiness... only to see the rubble and ruin.

We've all seen those sorts of movies, and we know how that particular literary device is designed to tug at our heartstrings... *Lifetime Television for Women*...is predicated on that very thing.

And yet, we seldom think of God himself being the one on the receiving end of such pain...

But that is exactly what Isaiah tells us: *For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry!*

In our Gospel for this morning, Jesus takes all the imagery of Isaiah's love song, and adds a few more details of his own. Not only are the inhabitants of the vineyard calloused and unfaithful, but they treat the emissaries of the one who loves them most with great contempt.... Beating the messengers and killing the heir.

We don't want to be your chosen!

We don't want your affection and steadfast love!

We don't even want your name anymore!

Leave us alone! We want to be just like all the nations!

Of all the peoples of the earth, God chose this vineyard to be his own...

And the heartbreak of rejection is more than he can bear.

And yet, even in his grief, he cannot forget his love...

He will not abandon them. And he is faithful to them, even unto death.

Have you ever had the experience of finding out, after the fact, how loving and generous someone has been, even when your behavior did not merit that kind of generosity and forgiveness?

It is often, only after we have seen the consequences of our own stubborn selfishness that our hearts are melted.

And when I am lifted high upon the cross, I will draw all men to myself.

The capacity of God to love us, even when we are most unlovable, astounds us when we finally open our eyes and see just how far he was willing to pursue us...

And having gazed on the crucified God...the God we rejected and mocked... we remember ourselves...we come to our senses...

He has been singing a love song to us ever since the world was young enough to be bounced on his knee...

And now at last, we sing our song to him:

*In life no house no home my Lord on earth might have; in death no friendly tomb, but what a stranger gave.
What can I say? Heaven was his home, but mine the tomb wherein He lay*

Friends, we are God's elect. His vineyard. His beloved. He has called us to himself... and in the fullness of time, we have at last recognized his love and claimed it as a blessing.

But in this vineyard, we must also bear fruit. It is not enough just to **have** the gifts we have been given... we must also use them for God's Glory.

Football coach Bobby Ross once commented to a player who had come to the team with loads of talent, but had so far done nothing with it...*Son, your potential's gonna get me fired!*

It is not enough just to have potential.

This morning, we are delighted that Logan Hyde Evans comes to us to receive the sacrament of baptism.

Her parents and extended loving family see in her so many dreams and hopes and opportunities.... And if they dare to imagine her future, even as we frail creatures see through a glass dimly, imagine what God sees, who holds all time in his hand.

Ah, what blessings are in store!

And what opportunities...

Not only for Logan, but for all of us.

Let us recommit ourselves, each of us on this day, to remembering who we are... chosen of the Lord, his beloved vineyard...

And mindful of whose we are... may we live the life to which we have been called...with a lilt in our step... and a song in our heart.

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