

Proper 22A – October 5, 2014
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philipians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Our faith teaches us that Jesus entered into his inheritance at his Ascension and sent the Holy Spirit to us as the pledge and guarantee of our also entering into that inheritance. Although what we see and experience in this world as it is is not the inheritance of God's Kingdom; nevertheless, we do have here and now what the Bible calls its "Earnest"—as St. Paul put it, "You were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise which is an earnest of our inheritance."ⁱ The word "earnest" was (and is) a commercial term meaning the first part-payment that seals a contract. This gospel parable teaches us that there is one heir and that we're not about to inherit anything by disrespecting, or humiliating or killing the heir or squandering what he has entrusted to us.

In telling this parable of the vineyard workers, Jesus is clearly thinking of the well known texts from Isaiah and from Psalm 80 - both songs about Israel as God's vineyard; and he wants his listeners thinking of these as well. Now, the absentee landlord and the rotten tenants are Jesus' own embellishments, which both heighten the drama and also complicate it. What did the tenants think they would gain by killing the heir? Did they forget the Landowner was still alive? If these readings were originally used to speak of the people or leaders of Israel and their relationship with God, those of us who respond to these tenants with righteous indignation had better pause to ask ourselves whether 2000 years later we are any better tenants of God's Vineyard—of this "fragile earth our island home" as our Prayer Book puts it.ⁱⁱ

Modern history is full of examples of how we have turned God's Vineyard into bloody battlefields, toxic wastelands and waterways, and a rapidly warming planet.ⁱⁱⁱ We cannot assume that we have any right to take hold of the inheritance of God's vineyard and continue to over-consume and contaminate, pilfer and pollute, destroy and dominate. Any real inheritance to us is therefore not only an object of hope but also of responsibility. The motto of the Values Party of New Zealand gets at this point: "We do not inherit the earth from our parents; [rather] we borrow it from our children." Or as a great Native American leader, Chief Seattle, put it, "The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth." And the twenty-fourth Psalm (v.1) takes it a step further, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it."

Earlier in Matthew's gospel (5:5), we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." Now the definition of meek from its original Aramaic of Jesus does not mean weak, or acquiescent, like a Casper Milquetoast. Rather, it is defined in its original meaning as "one who makes rigidities into a softer or liquid form"—that is, one who is not ideological, hardline; but rather, one who can show compassion and tender-heartedness along with their tough-mindedness; in short, one who exercises power under control—restrained power. With such an understanding, given present realities, as William Sloane Coffin stated, "Unless someone is willing to be meek, there will be no one left to inherit the earth."

And so, any earthly inheritance we can assume is a function of God's grace and forgiveness as well as our responsible tough-minded but tender-hearted stewardship of God's vineyard. This Sunday, what the Church has come to call Creation Sunday, falls on the day closest to the anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi. We need more than ever to look at the vision and witness of St. Francis. Francis lived out a vision of the world that was broad and generous minded. He lived for others in joy and compassion through the practice of simplicity and availability. His devotion to God was so wide that he found sources of that devotion in all the diverse people he encountered—rich and poor, healthy and sick, young and old—and he found sources of that devotion in all of nature and in the cycles of life from birth through death. He chose the simple life so that he could be less encumbered and more available to all those sources of devotion to God. He had to get rid of the parts of himself which prevented his availability to the poor and his joining Christ's mission. Francis' vision and witness was not something sweetly sentimental nor simplistic and thus irrelevant, as he is sometimes portrayed. Rather his was a witness and vision that we as a nation and as a human race have only begun to appreciate; and because we are so late to begin to practice this, we are facing consequences which we are only beginning to realize are having major impacts on the planet and our lives. How much we need to recover our reverence for creation, and to acknowledge the fact that our very existence depends on it!^{iv}

Unfortunately, besides the vision of St. Francis' that has been with us at least on the margins for 800 years, we 21st Century people are also heirs of a more than 300-year old vision that has separated and divorced in our minds Nature from Nature's God, the Creation from the Creator, as William Sloane Coffin pointed out.^v This relatively modern vision created a divorce in the so-called enlightenment mind that left Nature without any animating purpose, the Creation without value in and of itself. Nature still held its beauty, but the greedy eyes of human beings focused more on the riches in the warehouse than on the beauty in the shop, as it were. It's no coincidence that philosophic thought so paralleled the emergence of modern economic society in which Nature was to be seen merely as a raw material and a commodity, a means only to our ends. "We shall become the masters and possessors of Nature," summed up Rene Descartes. This perspective put humanity at the center point of Creation and relegated the rest of Creation to apparent meaninglessness *unless* it had usefulness to us.

And so, the qualitative view of Nature as expressed in Scripture and later, in the witness of St. Francis and Hildegard of Bingen—and even later, in Galileo and others—gave way to a quantitative view. Nature from then on was seen as neutral—essentially, a machine. And a machine has no purpose, only a function, a utility. It was obvious Nature's function was to serve human beings, the only purposeful creatures around. As historian Theodore Roszak described, this led in a philosophical progression of thought to something like this: once the stars, planets and this earth were seen as parts of a great machine, as Isaac Newton saw them; it was only a step to view animals as machines, as did Descartes; then to view human society as a machine, as did Thomas Hobbes; then to view the human body as a machine, as did Julien de La Mettrie and others; and then to view human behavior as machine-like, as did I.V. Pavlov, John Watson, and B.F. Skinner.^{vi} Need we add that if you can objectify all creation under a telescope or

microscope, and depersonalize all aspects of humanity, you can do all that all the more easily under a GPS/Laser-guided bomb sight. Thus we have progressed as the inheritors of this three-hundred year old vision.

In contrast to this, the best of our Christian Franciscan thought and practice—as well as Buddhist, Native American and other spirituality and modern scientific ecology—are all blowing in like a strong clear wind. These are not merely calling to us asking for caution lest we exhaust our natural resources and kill ourselves in the process. They also ask for reverence, to a re-marriage of Nature and Nature’s God.^{vii} And why a call to reverence? Because Nature has animating purposes of its own—intrinsic value, beauty and meaning unto itself. Obviously we cannot disregard our modern knowledge, or the necessity to be tough-minded about the basic needs of our present and future society, and more so, of the whole human family. But for our very survival we cannot be spared the vulnerability that comes from being tender-hearted.^{viii} Reversing the separation or divorce between Nature and Nature’s God—or rather us and God—that has occurred in our modern minds and actions over the last 300 years is the greatest challenge we face, alongside the related efforts to seek security, justice and peace in places of conflict—conflicts which will more and more be fueled by disputes over natural resources. In the meantime, as we come to terms with our mastering, dominating, controlling, polluting, deforesting, exhausting and destroying, we can by God’s grace repent, change course and rediscover a countervailing spirituality like that of St. Francis. Then, like him, we can exercise responsible action that shows more respect, more humility, more reverence, more love, more compassion, more heart, more communion, more joy, more simplicity, more sustainability. Would that all of us live according to the prayer from the Taize Community: “May the Lord keep us in the joy, the simplicity and the compassion of the Holy Gospel.” Those three things are the bottom line.^{ix} How very much we need to know that God can change us and that God in Christ does not give up on us. From our perspective as Easter people in a Good Friday world, let us not forget that the great mystery of God’s Purpose and Power is present to us, in the experience of love and forgiveness, communication and communion, responsiveness and responsibility—if we would but stop, look and listen, and be open *now* to the inheritance which is in store for us when “God will be all in all.”^x It’s as simple and ordinary and as profound as that.

ⁱ Ephesians 1:14; see also 2 Corinthians 1:21-22

ⁱⁱ The Book of Common Prayer, (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), p. 370.

ⁱⁱⁱ Our song of the vineyard doesn’t sound any more hopeful than the Biblical songs—you know the song—“He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored...”

^{iv} This has been a problem especially for many Christians; for as a former colleague of mine, Elizabeth Garnsey put it, the Church has had a tendency to mystify God in Jesus over the centuries, disconnect him from his Creation, and remove him from the realm of the earth-bound. After all, if we imagine him too much like us, we’d have to look too much like him. Instead, tradition has built up walls around the mystery of God made known in Jesus, giving the impression that God is untouchable, far away, unapproachable. In so many ways, the Church presumed to be the keeper of the mystery of God in Christ. We locked him up in ornate buildings and shrouded him within convoluted doctrines and creedal formulas, and sacramental altars with strict boundaries as to who could or could not participate or partake. As a result, many lives were

lived under the weight of guilt and the sense of unworthiness or distance. (See Elizabeth Garnsey, "Reclaiming the Earth-bound Jesus" (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church, April 22, 2007)). Also, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

Unfortunately, for the most part we *don't* see "earth crammed with heaven." As William Sloane Coffin points out, it's not that we're evil, we're just a little dull at times. Or maybe it's not that we're dull, only very much caught up in the grip of life and its circumstances, rushing to the next thing, losing sight of what or who we can discover in the present moment. Thomas Merton remarked that "being attentive to the times of the day...the reason that we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Each moment is God's own good time. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer, a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us" (Thomas Merton, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 49; see also Quoted in David Steindl-Rast, "Recollection of Thomas Merton's last days in the West" in *Monastic Studies*, 7:10, 1969).

^v William Sloane Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 86-92.

^{vi} Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland End: Politics and Transcendence in Post Industrial Society* (Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1973), pp. 184, 188. See also, Coffin, *Ibid.*

^{vii} I don't mean in some "new age" way that Nature is the same as God, nor am I suggesting a notion of Creationism. But there has been this divorce between the Creator and the Creation, caused by our "enlightened" culture.

^{viii} The fact is, Jesus, the Word who is God, through whom all things came to be, the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us; the one who died for our sins—personal, societal, ecological—is Risen and loose at this moment repairing a broken world and restoring humanity and all Creation to right relationship, and inviting us to join him in his ongoing mission.

^{ix} A former colleague of mine, Elizabeth Garnsey, reminds us that, "God in Christ is forever intimately connected with us, forever involved and in touch with our human experience...God in Christ is involved not just with the elements of creation as he sustains the universe, he is also a lover of the whole human experience; the human experience of mistakes; the human experience of suffering and illness and violence and death; and [is] all the more bound up with the human experience of redemption, of changed hearts, and of hope and of love that gives life a new chance, not just once, but again and again" (Elizabeth Garnsey, *Ibid.*). To be sure, God is mystery. But God is in the flesh too, God in Christ became flesh and dwelt among us, and as the Risen Lord is with us to the end of time. We treat that revelation either with reverence and gratitude, or we demean and even desecrate it by not recognizing God's purposeful presence all around us. All of God's creatures belong to God, no matter their particular fold. God's sheep and lambs are not a special breed or a chosen few; they include people and creatures everywhere.

^x 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23