

## FROM THE RECTOR: WOES OF ISAIAH AND JESUS

Two Sundays ago, the appointed gospel was the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 21:33-43). It's the day after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He's teaching in the temple. The Old Testament lesson was the plaintive text called "The Song of the Vineyard" (Isaiah 5:1-7). It ends with these words, "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 Isaiah, the song is followed immediately by six reproaches, six woes of judgment, not lament: woes for those who covet the possessions of others, who drink to excess, who mock God, who lie, who think they know it all, and who take bribes. Jerusalem and Judah are under God's judgment.

Before Jesus leaves the temple that day, never to return, he, too, pronounces judgment with seven reproaches, seven woes, also of judgment. New Testament scholar Daniel Harrington writes, "The Matthean Jesus as a prophet was sent to Israel, not as an opponent of Israel" (*The Gospel of Matthew* [2007], 327). His woes are different from Isaiah's, but the results are the same. The city will fall, the Second Temple will be torn down, and people will be killed, enslaved and scattered. The woes of Matthew's Jesus are not heard at a Sunday Eucharist-and it would be difficult to include them because of the way Matthew includes them in this day's teaching-and because of the way our lectionary is structured at this point in the church year.



In Matthew, Jesus calls his opponents, here the scribes and the Pharisees, "hypocrites." They are religious leaders who live in contradiction to what they say and what they do. Jesus denounces them for shutting the way to the kingdom of heaven for others and for themselves (23:13). There's a strong note of what we would call Anti-Judaism in the next woe: the scribes and Pharisees go out of the way to make a Gentile a Jew but are really making him or her a "son of hell" (23:15)-and not a Christian. The third woe has to do with rules about swearing that make no sense (23:16-22). The fourth is about caring about rules and not caring about "justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (23:23).

The fifth and the sixth are against people caring for what can be seen and neglecting what is in a person's heart (23:23-24, 25-26). In the seventh woe, Jesus associates their pride in their positions and way of life by naming them "sons of those who murdered the prophets" (23:31). Given the terrible history of Anti-Judaism in Christian history, and the role that Matthew and John in particular will come to play as time continues, I think you and I need to have a clear awareness of our history.

I close with this prayer from the Way of the Cross from *The Book of Occasional Services* (2003): Teach your Church, O Lord, to mourn the sins of which it is guilty, and to repent and forsake them; that, by your pardoning grace, the results of our iniquities may not be visited upon our children and our children's children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. -*Stephen Gerth*

