

The Idiots in the Vineyard

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for October 6, 2002

Lessons for Pentecost 20, Proper 22 in Year A

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:7-14

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Every now and then you just have to ask yourself where on Earth did Jesus get his characters from. I mean really. You take a look at the parable in today's Gospel reading, and you pretty much have to conclude that the people in it weren't firing on all four cylinders.

How could they possibly think they could get away with killing the son of the land owner and seizing his inheritance? Didn't any of them think far enough ahead to realize that once that happened, the owner would send in soldiers to wipe them out?

Let's face it, these guys were bloody stupid.

And yet, I believe that both you and I have heard enough "dumb crook" stories from our own time, that the idiocy of the vinedressers in the parable doesn't seem all that unbelievable.

Lamentable, yes. But not unbelievable. Because we have seen our brother, and he is often dumb as rocks.

Perhaps Jesus set up the story with such characters in order to make it abundantly clear to even the most mentally challenged person in the crowd just how incredibly stupid the vinedressers were.

And indeed, the crowd got the point.

But then there's another question - because there's another issue. The purpose of a parable is not just to tell a cute story with a little twist at the end. If that were the case, then Jesus would've merely been his era's version of O Henry. No, the purpose of a parable is to make a point indirectly that people might not have been willing or able to see had it been made directly. The parable of the Idiots in the Vineyard is definitely aimed at someone, and everyone in the crowd knew exactly who it was - and so do we. It was the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, who made the rules, enforced the rules, and made life difficult for everyone else who didn't quite measure up to the rules. The Pharisees, who were sure that they knew exactly what God's standards were, and that they were the ones to make sure that everyone either met them or knew where they fell short. The Pharisees, who were the ruling power in religion at the time, and didn't like the fact that Jesus was challenging their authority. The Pharisees, who didn't like Jesus telling people who they knew God hated, that God loved them too. The Pharisees, who rejected