

27th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

In the great vine-growing regions of the world, it soon becomes apparent how vineyards are different from other forms of agriculture. The vine-grower behaves towards the vineyard more like a passionate gardener than like a farmer. Vines are not a product that chops and changes with the years and seasons. Many vines can outlive their owners, and, a little like human beings, they offer a different gift of fruit in their youth, mature years and old age.

The business is beautifully illustrated in the books of Patricia Atkinson, *The Ripening Sun* and *La Belle Saison*. Patricia is an Englishwoman who went with her husband to live and work in a vineyard to the south of Bordeaux, in France. Her husband then withdrew back to England, leaving her to sink or swim in this new and totally alien world. The books are the story of how she came to love her vines and vineyard. They tell of the challenges and difficulties involved. But this is also the story of one woman's endurance, passion and imagination as she becomes more and more involved in making the vineyard a going concern. If the books recount the obstacles she had to overcome, they also reveal the immense kindness and support she received from her neighbours in the local community. Hers is a love affair with a community as much as with her vines. No wonder the wines she makes are a magical expression of such cooperative flair and goodwill.

The vineyard is favourite image of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. It brings out the closeness of the Lord to his people, the way he is prepared to work with them to produce fruit, his long-term investment in their success. But things can go wrong. If the vineyard is not well cared for, if it is neglected, it will not produce good fruit. If those who are in charge keep the produce for their own use, pretending it is their own and not God's, then disaster will ensue and the vineyard will be taken away from them.

As those who have inherited the Lord's vineyard, as we hear this parable we may find ourselves asking the question: "How are we to look after this gift to us?" The virtues of perseverance, imagination and working together will contribute greatly. It is also important to keep God in mind throughout our activities. St Paul in today's extract from his letter to the Phillipians, bids us ask God for anything we

need in prayer and thanksgiving, and God's peace will guard our hearts and thoughts. If we prune out all that is evil or destructive from our lives, the briars and thorns, and fill our minds with everything that is true and noble, good and pure, then we will produce in our lives and in the Church the fruits graced by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We are called to care for the vineyard of the Lord, to build up God's kingdom in the world and help it to bear fruit. Each one of us has a calling and responsibility to work towards that end.

There's a sense too in which God has given each of us a unique vineyard or garden to cultivate in our own lives: in our life of faith and prayer, and in our relationships with the people we know and among whom we live, our families, friends and colleagues. We are all responsible for the well-being of our vineyards. Just as there is no one way of cultivating a vineyard – growers argue all the time as to how best select, grow and pick their grapes – so as we go through life we will find that we make some choices that work, others that fail. But even in difficult times, when faith seems weak and relationships are challenging, we can remember that nothing is irredeemable. Vines are a hardy crop and benefit from growing on stony ground and being vigorously, if carefully, pruned. And they tend to grow better when cooperation and goodwill are involved in cultivation and caring for them. And perhaps the same is true of us.

Above all, let's always remember the passion the Lord has for his vineyard. We are never alone in our endeavours. The Lord is always there with us, encouraging us and working alongside us as we bring to fruition the unique gift of our lives.