



A sermon for Holy Communion (BCP) at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 26 July by the Reverend Rosey Lunn, Priest Vicar.

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Romans 8, 12-17; Matthew 7, 15-21

A few years ago, I was asked to preach at the annual Founder's Day service for Bristol Grammar School, in Bristol Cathedral.

That distinguished educational establishment was founded in the 16th century by a prosperous Bristol merchant with the name Nicholas Thorne, and the school motto is taken from today's gospel reading – in Latin, 'Ex Spinis Uvas' – from thorns, grapes; the school song, sung raucously by the boys (when the school was for boys only) had a resounding chorus – 'ex spinis uvas'.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew, on the theme of gathering fruit – gives us the incredulous question posed by Jesus: 'Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs of thistles?' - to which the presumed answer from the crowd listening might be 'You must be joking!' He was, after all, speaking to a gathering of country people who were familiar with growing things, and had the commonsense to understand his reference.

For anyone involved in the business of cultivation, thorns and thistles are not good news. They were never part of the original plan of creation. According to the most ancient of the Bible stories of creation in Genesis chapter 3, it was only when the plan of the Creator had been upset by the pride and foolishness of Adam and Eve, and they were expelled from Paradise, that thorns and thistles appeared: we hear God's haunting words of censure to the banished Adam: *'Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.'*

Against the background of this mess of human failure, again and again the Bible gives us, glimpses of the Creator trying to put things right: to re-create a cultivated landscape, in which order is restored, and once again there is growth and fruitfulness. He tries – he puts all the effort he can into the task, clearing the ground, planting the choicest vines, protecting the precious crop of grapes - but

there is disappointment: the fruit is bad; all that effort has been in vain.

This is not, of course, just a story about the cultivation of vineyards: it is a story about people, about the people God was particularly concerned with – the people he had chosen to be *his* people, the people he had cared for, protected, nurtured, guided, with the intention that they would reflect his nature in the way they live. But they failed to live up to his expectations....

Here again in these verses, we have the theme of expectations: what do you expect when you go to listen to the latest prophet or teacher who comes to you with some great new message?

Do you judge them by their appearances – or by the effect of their words? Beware – don't be fooled by appearances – the smooth talking, the image – look at the difference they make, the results they actually produce: 'you will know them by their fruits!'

The essential point was that Jesus was saying that it's the end result that really matters – the good harvest which may or may not be gathered. But remember that Jesus had a sense of the comic, which often revealed itself in absurd language; and nothing delighted him more than standing ideas on their head, turning upside down conventional ways of looking at things. It happens all the time in the gospels – scruffy people on the margins are invited to posh parties, despised tax collectors are chosen to be friends of Jesus, immoral women are welcomed into his band of followers, lepers were touched: again and again, there are surprises; the most unlikely candidates for preferment are given a special place – nothing is as you might expect it

In education, as in life in general, there are sometimes surprises: grapes do seem to grow in the most unlikely places – students who had driven their teacher to despair may occasionally turn out to be surprisingly able in other ways.

A few examples:

'He has no ambition...Very truthful, but a regular 'pickle' in many ways at present... Is a constant trouble to everybody and is always in some scrape or other. He cannot be trusted to behave himself anywhere.' (Churchill)

'His progress has been very poor. Is he mentally disabled? Unless there is an improvement in his grades he will have to leave this school.' (Einstein – who in fact did drop out of school when he was 15).

'A "dull student", extremely disruptive in class, too stupid to learn anything. ' (Thomas Edison)

'Certainly on the road to failure... hopeless . . . rather a clown in class...wasting other pupils' time.' (John Lennon)

The chapter from which this gospel reading is taken begins with the words '*Judge not, that you be not judged*'. Who are we to make judgements about where good fruits might be found?

Jesus's answer to this rhetorical question about thorns growing from thorns, and figs from thistles, might be, 'well, actually, the way things turn out in my kingdom - they just might!' Because it's not always the projects you expect to succeed that do; you can lavish care and attention on a vineyard and what do you get? A duff crop! And there is a message of judgement here: no room for complacency - those fine vines are fit only to be chopped down and burnt. They have had their chance – and failed to be productive. Success cannot be taken for granted!

In the confusing world in which we live, where it is so hard to distinguish truth from fiction, fact from AI, to see behind the image, and have the perception to know who can be trusted – especially in such shifting and uncertain times of transition, such as we are living in now, when the old certainties seem to have crumbled away.

Don't just listen to the words you hear, says Jesus; wait and see what the fruits are; and don't be tempted to make premature judgements, because God can have surprises in store, sometimes apparently hopeless cases can yield amazing results, absurd surprises do happen, – especially when God, who has a great sense of humour, has anything to do with it.

And underlying all our uncertainty about who can be trusted, where we are to place our hope – that great sense of trust and confidence which we heard of in our first reading from Romans, when Paul reminds us that we are adopted – and beloved – children of God, to whom we can always turn in our confusion, crying out 'Abba, Father – help me to know what is your will, and to do it.'

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