



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 10
Proper 15 (C)
August 14, 2022

[RCL] Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Isaiah 5:1-7

Chapter five concludes the introductory section of the Book of Isaiah. While previous chapters have been hopeful, chapter five is one of indictment and judgment. The primary verdict is that God's people have acted unjustly; they have not acted in accordance with God's justice. Isaiah uses the metaphor of a vineyard, depicting God's activity as agricultural labor. Israel and Judah are the vineyard in which God has labored, striving for good fruit, but what his people have yielded is inedible. He will now remove them from the land promised to their forefathers and it shall become a wasteland. Saint Jerome recalls the tears that Jesus shed for Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44, weeping for the city that is the religious and political center of his people. Saint Basil the Great offers a spiritual reading of this passage, calling each of us to be vines in the vineyard, cultivating fruit in our souls and in our lives, so that we might not be thrown into the fire. One might think of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Mark 11 or the vine that is burned in John 15. Let us respond to, rather than reject, the Lord's cultivating labor.

- Where do you see fruitful branches in your life? Where do you see branches needing to be trimmed?
- We do not often think of God grieving over his people. How does such an image change your perspective of Isaiah's prophetic message?

Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-18

We see here a different twist on a similar theme as Isaiah. The first verse depicts the Lord as a shepherd rather than a vinedresser, but he is the guardian of Israel. When we look at verses eight and beyond, we see the agricultural theme of Isaiah, but in the aftermath of God's judgment, executed by foreign powers. Israel is the vine that the Lord brought out of Egypt, a reference to God's saving power in the Exodus. God established his people in the land like one establishes a vineyard, with care and intentionality. In light of this care, the Psalmist asks how the Lord can let his people be subjected to these foreign powers. These foreign powers do not glorify the Lord. They are not godly. In verse sixteen, we see a prefiguration of Christ, "the man of your right hand, and son of man you have made so strong for yourself." Despite the devastation that our sins have wrought, the Lord is faithful to his people and will restore them. The vineyard will be restored to full health – a new and greater health.

- If God has planted you and me in this time and place, how can each of us respond to his cultivating hand and flourish?

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

What a complex depiction of faith! We see the saving activity of God at the Red Sea and Jericho. We see the sacrificial actions of Old Testament characters who are acclaimed for their faith. Many of these characters have serious flaws; they are almost examples of deficient faith. Gideon tests God, Barak is cowardly, and Samson is licentious. What we do see is a faithfulness even to the point of death, despite lingering character flaws. At some point, even if not at all points, they risked their lives for the faith. Yet, the conclusion that this passage draws is unexpected. Like a literary icon, this description of the imperfect faithful should redirect our gaze toward the salvific work of Christ. As in the cases of those others, our faith should make us willing to sacrifice all we have to the creator of the universe. Saint John Chrysostom sees this passage calling us to discard anything superfluous so that we might take up Christ. Jesus is leading us out of the Egypt of our sinfulness. He is tearing down our walls of pride, stripping away our idols so that we might sit with him in the throne room of God.

- What is the difference between a flawed but faithful character and a flawed and faithless character?
- Who in my life is an icon, pointing my gaze toward Christ?

Luke 12:49-56

The picture of Jesus in Luke's Gospel is often seen as the friendly, loving Jesus, but here we find a hard teaching of Jesus. The one we call "the Prince of Peace" is telling us that he has not come to bring peace but division. This is not even a throwaway statement, because it is further enumerated as divisions within families. How do we receive this contradiction? We can start by looking at the fire which Jesus is bringing. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem saw this as the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, coming to the apostles. This establishment of the church was a revolutionary act, a catalyst demanding individual response. Some accept and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, growing, as Saint Ambrose suggests, in virtues such as charity, faith, and justice. But others reject both the Holy Spirit and those who live in the Spirit. Love of neighbor is the result of loving God, but it must be properly ordered, the former subordinated to the latter. Some will chafe at this, and divisions are formed. These divisions can cut across nations, peoples, and even families; no human organization, however good, can determine the individual response to the Holy Spirit.

- Where have I seen the Holy Spirit demanding revolutionary love of God?
- Where have I seen the Holy Spirit cultivating virtues such as charity, faith, and justice?

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