

Trinity Church
October 5, 2008

Pentecost 21
RCL, Year A, Proper 22

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be
acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

The last few weeks have been an unrelenting downpour of troubling news about the economy, and this week troubling was elevated to crisis and even panic as Congress and the President worked to take unprecedented emergency action to help stabilize some markets. Here in Maryland, the buyout of Constellation Energy and Wachovia Bank has brought the crisis home to us, and when we dare to look at the value of our savings, who cannot help but be nervous about the future?

It has been interesting to listen as we analyze and reflect on this new and shocking state of affairs. Some voices say, "How could we have been so blind?" We actually believed that some businesses were "too big to fail," and that the market would grow and grow, despite our bad decisions and inflated valuations. We believed that we could carry debt that never really needed to be paid off, but only repackaged. How could we have been so foolish?

Some voices of anger try to find someone to blame. "It was those greedy Wall Street executives who did this," we tell each other. They don't deserve any reward in this crisis. Fire them all and grab their parachutes out of their hands.

When you pour the fuel crisis over all this bad news, we are told that our houses are too big, our cars too huge, our consumption far too conspicuous, that our life-styles are out of balance with the environment and the rest of the world. How could we be so uncritically attracted to material things? And how will we ever be able to adjust to living with less? The pain will be severe.

Self-deception, it seems to me, is at the center of the parable that Jesus tells us today. How could those tenants of the vineyard have been so foolish? They became so enamored with the vineyard, so dependent upon it for their identity and worth, that they actually believed that the vineyard belonged to them, that they deserved the vineyard, and that they couldn't live without it.

This perilous attachment to the vineyard, one could say idolatrous attachment to the vineyard, caused their relationship with God to go bad, poisonously bad. They broke every one of the ten commandments that God so carefully gave to them on Mount Sinai. They worshiped the vineyard instead of God. They set it up as an idol. They held the owner of the vineyard in contempt and despised his authority. They dishonored God's servants and they murdered the landowner's son. They lied, they tried to steal the vineyard, and they were so filled with greed and envy that they were blinded to any moral obligation. The vineyard that was meant to be a place of prosperity and beauty for all became a chronic scene of crisis and devastation.

Jesus tells us plainly in this parable that self-deception and idolatrous attachment put us in peril: moral peril in our relationship with others, but more importantly blindness to our life-giving relationship with God. How could we be so foolish? How could we turn away from life itself to embrace that which is passing away?

Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians that he, too, was self-deceived, trusting in things that had no lasting value. But it is never too late to come to your senses and turn to Christ. "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and now I see that they were not as important as I thought they were. Now I am free to gain Christ and be found in him. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I press on to make Christ's life my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Perhaps this current and painful fiscal crisis that we are in is a gift to us from God. It gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate our relationship with material things and the trust that we misplace in them. It gives us a chance to change how we live. It gives us the opportunity to turn again to Christ, to renew our faith in God, to put our whole trust in his mercy and love. When we fear God and worship God aright, then our relationship with others changes; we value the commandments those tenants broke in their blindness, and we strive for the things that last, for the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When Christ is again at the center of our lives, we notice that our anxiety about the future is less; our fear that others will not love us or accept us with less goes away. God, the owner of the vineyard, and we, God's tenants, are at peace. God receives what is due of our worship. We live peacefully and prudently in the vineyard, and in Christ, our joy is complete.