

Grapes worthy of Jesus' Label
 Homily for October 7-8th 2017
 27th Sunday of Ordinary Time

A week ago I got back from a most blessed pilgrimage. Along with 30 other people from Calgary, 26 of whom are parishioners of St. Peter's, we journeyed to Spain. Over the course of seven days we walked 113 km of the Camino Frances to arrive at the Cathedral of Santiago on September 29th. There at noon, on the Feast of St. Michael, Gabriel and Raphael we shared in the Pilgrims' Mass. There were hundreds of people at the Cathedral. With no room left in the pews people were sitting on the floor and standing!

Each day over 700 people enter into Santiago de Compostella, having journeyed a portion of, or the entirety of, one of seven routes that all converge on this city where the relics of St. James are housed at the Cathedral.

There is much I could share with you about the pilgrimage. For today I want to tell you about our dinners. Picture 31 people, often sitting at one long table, or on a few occasions, at three smaller tables, all in close proximity. There was lively and spirited conversation, and speaking of spirits, generous glasses of red and white wine. Now remember this is Spain, no need to order the wine. It just kept on appearing. It was like the Wedding at Cana! No one had too much so as to be unruly but the grape elixir added joy to an already festive gathering. On Saturday, September 30th our last evening together, we were sharing a dining room with a group of ten pilgrims from the US who had walked the Camino to raise money for Catholic Charities. What a joyful time we had with them, as we raised a glass in celebration of having attained our goal and sang each other's national anthems. Truth be told, they didn't know ours so we sang both ours and theirs. The room had such lively acoustics so as to make our thirty plus voices sound more like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir than tired Catholic pilgrims.

I kept thinking about these meals that we enjoyed at day's end as I read the appointed readings for this Mass. God's people are compared to grapes in a vineyard. Grapes that were to grow sweet and ripe so as to be made into the best of wines. But sadly, as Isaiah concludes:

***God expected it to yield grapes,
 but it yielded wild grapes.
 he expected justice,
 but saw bloodshed;
 righteousness,
 but heard a cry!***

God's chosen ones, be they Israel of old, or Jesus' disciples today, are to be the kind of people whose lives are to be offered so as to be made into the good wine of God's loving grace. There is to be about the Christian community a quality of life that is good and pleasing to the Lord. We are to add to the world something of the pleasantness and richness that those Spanish wines did for our table fellowship.

So how can we become more the kind of people who are the kind of grapes that can be used to make vintage wine worthy of the label: “Jesus’ Merlot” or the “Saviour’s Pinot grigio.” (pronounced: Pee-no gree-zo)?

To answer this question let me share with you an acrostic built on the word *wine*. Christians who are healthy grapes are:

Winsome
Intentional
Natural
Excellent.

Let’s now examine each of these words as we consider how we can be healthy grapes in the vineyard of the Lord.

Winsome is not a word we use very much but one I love. The first part of the word comes from a Germanic root “wynn” meaning “to delight”. The second syllable comes from the word: “sum” and means “to strive”, “to desire”. Put it together the word winsome means “to desire or to strive to delight”. Christians are to be winsome because it should be our deepest desire to delight God. Why? Because we have a relationship that is one of love. Remember how the passage from Isaiah begins:

***Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.***

This song in Isaiah 5 is a love song, but it is a “hurtin” love song, as so many are. That’s the thing about love..... It is so easy to hurt and disappoint the ones we love the most, especially God. But love also calls us to a deepening desire to delight the one who is the object of our Love. It is when we meditate more deeply on the dimension of our relationship with the Lord that we will ask of him:

Help me Jesus to be winsome. Help me to become ever more the kind of person whose life has a fragrance that is truly pleasing and a delight to you.

Added to a character that is winsome is a person who lives with intention. We realize that the life we have been given is not ours to do with whatever we want. Rather we are to live knowing that what has been entrusted to us has to ultimately be returned to the rightful owner of the vineyard. Jesus in today’s Gospel reminds us how hard this is for us humans to remember. Rather than handing over the produce to the one in whose vineyard our life is lived we so easily reject the Lord, who is the one we are to most fully delight. However when we discover that a life joined to Jesus is not one of miserly protectiveness but of generous openness we can willingly and intentionally give to Jesus what is his. That is the produce of our lives.

When this happens we more fully live a naturally supernatural life. Grapes that are planted in good soil, with the right conditions should be healthy grapes. That is why the lover of the Isaiah's vineyard is so saddened. He had done everything to ensure these would be good grapes. But here's the difference between grapes and humans..... We have to cooperate with the vine grower in a way grapes needn't. But when we do this, as Thomas Aquinas put it centuries ago, "grace perfects nature". As we give ourselves to the Lord we become increasingly people who discover, "I am changing and maturing. My relationship with Jesus and His Church is allowing me to discover what it really means to be human".

Like Paul says in Philippians those who are growing to be naturally supernatural are learning to entrust everything to God in prayer. When we pray, we must always remember three things. We must remember the love of God, which only ever desires what is best for us. We must remember the wisdom of God, which alone knows what is best for us. We must remember the power of God, which alone can bring about that which is best for us. Everyone who prays with a perfect trust in the love, wisdom and power of God will find God's peace.

Winsome Christians, who live with intention and are naturally supernatural will also desire to live a life of excellence. Remember how St. Paul puts it?

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

St. Paul is here calling us to live each day not allowing ourselves to be pulled down to those things that degrade life, but rather we are to seek to see in the world around us all that enhances and enriches life. Those things that are excellent.

And it is this desire for seeing what is truly good in life that made the Camino such a moving experience. There I met Charlie, a man who for the first time since he was in grade seven was praying a rosary given to him by one of our pilgrims. On the Camino I met a woman who was able to lay down resentment and hurt she had carried for 20 years. There I met a woman who had turned 65 while she walked from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, some 800 km. There I got to know brothers and sisters in Christ who are part of the community that is called St. Peter's.

And there on September 29th I was privileged to stand at the Altar of the Cathedral of Santiago and Con-Celebrate Mass with an Italian Bishop, some 30 priests and a cathedral with well over a thousand people worshipping together.

The excellence I discovered on the Camino inspired me, stirred me and deepened my desire to be a grape in the vineyard of the beloved worthy of Jesus' label. I pray that you too will desire to be such grapes for it is only together that we can be pressed into wine fit for him in whose vineyard we live.