

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday Homily St John's Bath, 2011.  
Readings: Is 5 1-7; Phil 4 6-9; Mt 21 33-43.

Today we are sunning ourselves in Bath. A week or so ago we were doing the same in the Spanish city of Cordoba. That is a city, not only of great beauty but also of deep religious roots. Here is evidence of the vitality of all three of those religions, which flow from Abraham – surely a vineyard from which God expected a rich crop of grapes. And yes there they are: the old synagogue, which had formed the faith of a lively Jewish community, which included the great philosopher, Maimonides. And there is the mosque with its seemingly endless rows of arches carrying the eye on through a veritable forest away into the mystery of God. And then. Of course, there is the Christian inheritance bearing witness to that holy mystery made homely in Jesus while struggling to embrace these other religious riches. So, on that synagogue wall, I saw the words of the very psalm I had been reciting that morning in the daily office. There too I recalled the powerful influence of that Maimonides on Thomas Aquinas and so on the whole development of Catholic theology. What a tantalising sharing of grapes this vineyard had to offer! Yet there is a darker side to Cordoba – a vineyard which yielded sour grapes. The Catholic Church expelled that Jewish community in 1492 and it celebrated eventual victory over Islam by squashing that elegant mosque in the somewhat uncomfortable baroque embrace of its cathedral. As well as the sharing of good grapes there was the conflict and destruction of these sour ones.

The grapes of religion can be very sour indeed. That is the reality with which our world is living today. In Iran, Youssef Nadarkhani lies in prison awaiting execution. Why? Because he refuses to renounce his Christian faith. So there are those who would simply write off all religion as the cause of conflict and strife. Allow a child to share in its religious inheritance in a faith school, and you will be accused of setting that child on the path of extremism and terror. But that is to overlook the

distinctly sour grapes of secularism – of an atheist Nazi regime or Stalinist totalitarianism. The wiser course is, rather than writing off religion, to ask why something which can produce such beautiful art, indeed beautiful lives, which can give such depth to the human enterprise – why this should take the turn to violence and cruelty?

Jesus, I think, gives the answer in today's gospel story of the vineyard. Notice that, unlike the Old Testament lesson, here the focus is not on the quality of the fruit but on those tenant farmers who are meant to be looking after the vineyard. Here the trouble is the 'take-over bid', which they are mounting. Those tenants treat the vineyard as their own. So, when the owner's servants come to collect the produce, they are beaten up and some of them even killed. When, at last, the owner sends his own son to claim possession of that vineyard, the tenants see this as the opportunity to finally make it their own. They seize the son and they kill him. This story is, of course, addressed to a particular situation in the mission of Jesus. He has just thrown down the gauntlet to rulers in the extremely provocative act of his entry into Jerusalem. He has gone on to challenge the religious establishment in his 'cleansing' of the Temple. And, in this context as St Matthew puts it, it was not hard for those chief priests and Pharisees to see that the story of the 'take-over bid' was aimed at them. They were indeed plotting to get rid of the Son and Heir, so that their control of God's people should be secured.

Religion turns violent and cruel when it engages in this 'take-over bid'. When its functionaries try to take over from God and run things in their own way, then God becomes for them just a mascot, a power recruited to support 'our cause', 'our nation', 'our sect'. The true and living God is turned into a puppet on a string, manipulated by ecclesiastical operatives. This is religion, which has forgotten those unending arches, which carry us away beyond all words, all pictures, all thoughts – away into the mystery of God who is ungraspable. For this is the God who is

himself, who goes his own way, does his own thing. This is the Wind who blows where she will. This is the Word made flesh who lives the way of God humanly in this world. This is the Incarnate Son who is always way out beyond us, so that we are always running to catch up with him. It is when we begin to learn this lesson that religion is kept safe from violence and cruelty. Follow those unending arches and we take the steps of a disciple, a learner, allowing that Holy Spirit of Truth to lead us on into ever deeper truth. Instead of imagining that we have caught God in some verbal net, we are set free with St Paul, to 'fill our minds' with everything that is true, beautiful and good-from whatever source and with whatever label, it comes. Instead of clinging on to our own little bits of truth, desperately trying to protect them, we are now free to roam the world, to delight in all the evidence of this God who cannot be tamed or controlled. They may push the Son and Heir outside the city walls and kill him, but, says Jesus, this Stone, thrown to one side by the builders, is in fact the Corner stone, which holds all these riches together.

Fr Peter Cornwell.