



The Holy See

CAPPELLA PAPALE FOR THE OPENING
OF THE 12th ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls
Sunday, 5 October 2008*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The First Reading, taken from the Book of Isaiah, as well as the passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, have presented to our liturgical assembly an evocative allegorical image of Sacred Scripture: the image of the vineyard which we have heard mentioned on the preceding Sundays. The initial passage of the Gospel account refers to the "canticle of the vineyard" which we find in Isaiah. This is a canticle set in the autumnal context of the grape harvest: a miniature masterpiece of Hebrew poetry which must have been very familiar to those listening to Jesus and from which, as from other references by the prophets (cf. Hos 10: 1; Jer 2: 21; Ez 17: 3-10; 19: 10-14; Ps 79: 9-17), it was easy to understand that the vineyard symbolized Israel. God bestowed the same care upon his vineyard, upon the People he had chosen, that a faithful husband lavishes upon his wife (cf. Ez 16: 1-14; Eph 5: 25-33).

Therefore the image of the vineyard, together with that of the wedding feast, describes the divine project of salvation and is presented as a moving allegory of God's Covenant with his People. In the Gospel, Jesus takes up the canticle of Isaiah but adapts it to his listeners and to the new period in salvation history. The emphasis is not so much on the vineyard as on the workers in it, from whom the landowner's "servants" ask for rent on his behalf. However, the servants are abused and even murdered. How is it possible not to think of the vicissitudes of the Chosen People and of the destiny reserved for the prophets sent by God? In the end, the owner of the

vineyard makes a final attempt: he sends his own son, convinced that at least they will listen to him. Instead the opposite happens: the labourers in the vineyard murder him precisely because he is the landowner's son, that is, his heir, convinced that this will enable them to take possession of the vineyard more easily. We are therefore witnessing a leap in quality with regard to the accusation of the violation of social justice as it emerges from Isaiah's canticle. Here we clearly see that contempt for the master's order becomes contempt for the master: it is not mere disobedience to a divine precept, it is a true and proper rejection of God: the mystery of the Cross appears.

What the Gospel passage reports challenges our way of thinking and acting. It does not only speak of Christ's "hour", of the mystery of the Cross at that moment, but also of the presence of the Cross in all epochs. It challenges in a special way the people who have received the Gospel proclamation. If we look at history, we are often obliged to register the coldness and rebellion of inconsistent Christians. As a result of this, although God never failed to keep his promise of salvation, he often had to resort to punishment. In this context it comes naturally to think of the first proclamation of the Gospel from which sprang Christian communities that initially flourished but then disappeared and today are remembered only in history books. Might not the same thing happen in our time? Nations once rich in faith and vocations are now losing their identity under the harmful and destructive influence of a certain modern culture. There are some who, having decided that "God is dead", declare themselves to be "god", considering themselves the only architect of their own destiny, the absolute owner of the world. By ridding himself of God and not expecting salvation from him, man believes he can do as he pleases and that he can make himself the sole judge of himself and his actions. However, when man eliminates God from his horizon, declares God "dead", is he really happy? Does he really become freer? When men proclaim themselves the absolute proprietors of themselves and the sole masters of creation, can they truly build a society where freedom, justice and peace prevail? Does it not happen instead - as the daily news amply illustrates - that arbitrary power, selfish interests, injustice and exploitation and violence in all its forms are extended? In the end, man reaches the point of finding himself lonelier and society is more divided and bewildered.

Yet there is a promise in Jesus' words: the vineyard will not be destroyed. While the unfaithful labourers abandon their destiny, the owner of the vineyard does not lose interest in his vineyard and entrusts it to other faithful servants. This means that, although in certain regions faith is dwindling to the point of dying out, there will always be other peoples ready to accept it. For this very reason, while Jesus cites Psalm 118[117], "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (v. 22), he gives the assurance that his death will not mean God's defeat. After being killed, he will not remain in the tomb, on the contrary, precisely what seems to be a total defeat will mark the beginning of a definitive victory. His painful Passion and death on the Cross will be followed by the glory of his Resurrection. The vineyard, therefore, will continue to produce grapes and will be rented by the owner of the vineyard: "to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons" (Mt 21: 41).

The image of the vineyard with its moral, doctrinal and spiritual implications was to recur in the discourse at the Last Supper when, taking his leave of the Apostles, the Lord said: "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit" (Jn 15: 1-2). Thus, starting from the Paschal event, the history of salvation was to reach a decisive turning point and those "other tenants" were to play the lead as chosen shoots grafted on Christ, the true vine, and yield abundant fruits of eternal life (cf. Collect). We too are among these "tenants", grafted on Christ who desired to become the "true vine" himself. Let us pray the Lord that in the Eucharist he will give us his Blood, himself, that he will help us to "bear fruit" for eternal life and for our time.

The comforting message that we gather from these biblical texts is the certainty that evil and death do not have the last word but that it is Christ who wins in the end. Always! The Church never tires of proclaiming this Good News, as is also happening today, in this Basilica, dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles who was the first to spread the Gospel in vast regions of Asia Minor and Europe. We shall meaningfully renew this proclamation at the 12th General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops whose theme is *"The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church"*. I would like to greet here with cordial affection all of you, venerable Synod Fathers, and all those who are taking part in this meeting as experts, auditors and special guests. I am pleased also to welcome the Fraternal Delegates of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I extend to the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops and his collaborators the expression of gratitude of us all for the hard work they have carried out in the past months, together with my good wishes for the efforts that await them in the coming weeks.

When God speaks, he always asks for a response. His saving action demands human cooperation; his love must be reciprocated. Dear brothers and sisters, may what the biblical text recounts about the vineyard never occur: "[he] looked for it to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes" (Is 5: 2). The Word of God alone can profoundly change man's heart so it is important that individual believers and communities enter into ever increasing intimacy with his Word. The Synodal Assembly will focus attention on this fundamental truth for the life and mission of the Church. To draw nourishment from the Word of God is her first and fundamental task. In fact, if the Gospel proclamation is her *raison d'être* and mission, it is indispensable that the Church know and live what she proclaims, so that her preaching may be credible despite the weaknesses and poverty of the people of whom she is comprised. We know, furthermore, that the proclamation of the Word, at the school of Christ, has the Kingdom of God as its content (cf. Mk 1: 14-15, but the Kingdom of God is the very person of Jesus who, with his words and actions, offers salvation to people of every epoch. Interesting in this regard is St Jerome's reflection: "Whoever does not know Scripture does not know the power and wisdom of God, then ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ" (*Prologue of the commentary on Isaiah*: n. 1, CCL 73, 1).

In this Pauline Year we hear the cry of the Apostle to the Gentiles resounding with special urgency: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9: 16); a cry that becomes for every

Christian a pressing invitation to serve Christ. "The harvest is plentiful" (Mt 9: 37) the Divine Teacher still repeats today: so many still do not know him and are awaiting the first proclamation of his Gospel; others, although they received a Christian formation, have become less enthusiastic and retain only a superficial contact with God's Word; yet others have drifted away from the practice of the faith and need a new evangelization. Then there are plenty of people of right understanding who ask themselves essential questions about the meaning of life and death, questions to which only Christ can give satisfactory answers. It is, therefore, becoming indispensable for Christians on every continent to be ready to reply to those who ask them to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pt 3: 15), joyfully proclaiming the Word of God and living the Gospel without compromises.

Venerable and dear Brothers, may the Lord help us to question ourselves together, in the coming weeks of the Synod's work, on how to make the Gospel proclamation increasingly effective in our time. We all know how necessary it is to make the Word of God the centre of our lives, to welcome Christ as our one Redeemer, as the Kingdom of God in person, to ensure that his light may enlighten every context of humanity: from the family to the school, to culture, to work, to free time and to the other sectors of society and of our life. In taking part in the Eucharistic celebration we are always aware of the close connection that exists between the proclamation of the Word of God and the Eucharistic sacrifice: it is the Mystery itself that is offered for our contemplation. This is why "the Church", as the Second Vatican Council highlights, "has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 21). The Council rightly concludes: "Just as from constant attendance at the Eucharistic mystery the life of the Church draws increase, so a new impulse of spiritual life may be expected from increased veneration of the Word of God, which "stands for ever" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 26).

May the Lord grant that we approach with faith the twofold banquet of the Body and Blood of Christ. May Mary Most Holy, who "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2: 19) obtain this for us. May she teach us to listen to the Scriptures and meditate upon them in an inner process of maturation that never separates the mind from the heart. May the Saints come to our aid, and in particular the Apostle Paul, whom during this year we are increasingly discovering as an undaunted witness and herald of God's Word. Amen!