

**Reflection on the Gospel- 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 21:33-43)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

An absentee landowner with slaves to do his bidding is not an attractive hero for a story in this as in any age. While the international community has long-since outlawed slavery, we have become increasingly aware of the persistence of a lucrative industry in our world structured around the sexual and labour enslavement of vulnerable people. Groups such as ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking of Humans) are raising awareness and taking action on behalf of those enslaved.

In our gospel story, Jesus' audience, the chief priests and elders, make the slave owner even less attractive than Jesus may have intended. They complete Jesus' story by making the landowner a murderer like his tenants. They also unwittingly condemn themselves as the unworthy tenants who will be supplanted by others, probably others whom they currently despise. Jesus takes up their response and turns it back upon them. In Jesus' summing up, the vineyard becomes God's empire or reign and the grapes become the fruit of God's way of being in the world. Whether or not Jesus intends the landowner to be an image of God remains an open question, especially as it is not Jesus but his opponents who depict the owner as a murderer.

Jesus' refashions a story first told by the prophet Isaiah, and Matthew reworks Mark's version of the story from Isaiah. In its present context and form, the story evokes and foreshadows the fate of Jesus, the last in a long line of persecuted prophets and God's executed son. The careful preparation of the vineyard and the quality of the harvest form the all important sub text. God's people should reasonably expect to be safe in the hands of trusted caretakers or 'tenants'. When the tenants resort to violence, even if they have legitimate demands, they find themselves replaced by others.

Jesus is continuing the theme of last week's gospel: the outcasts of society are entering God's arena before the temple authorities. Maybe Matthew is reminding his generation of church leaders to handle their sacred responsibilities with the utmost care and attention to the values of God's reign. If they fail to do so, they too will find themselves replaced by others. The gospel continues to function as a reminder that we are tenants or caretakers, entrusted with the sacred mission of bringing God's transformative dream to a fractured world. We can do this effectively if we recognise and listen to the voices of the prophets in our midst. There is no place in God's vineyard for the sort of destructive self-interest that displaces the vulnerable and persecutes or silences the prophets. Eradicating slavery remains an urgent gospel imperative.