

Isaiah 5:1-7
Anthony Codling
Church on the Corner

my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
4 What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?
5 And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
6 I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!

Brutal but effective, brutal but effective – was the Guardian headline on a story about why Team GB won so many medals in the Olympics

‘It’s a brutal regime, but it’s as crude as it is effective’ said Dr Garcia a senior lecturer in sports management at Loughbrough University. Sports that failed to hit their 2012 medal target either had funding reduced or cut altogether, whereas those that exceeded expectations had funding increased... a modern day version of Isaiah 5 1-7.

Brutal but effective: London 2012 541 athletes (65 medals), Rio 2016 366 athletes 67 medals – 23% (about one in five) of Team GB athletes took home medals in 2012, but 36% more than one in three won medals in Rio 2016, and our Paralympic team performed better still.

Brutal but effective...

And so to Isaiah 5, 1-7. I'll start with a quick overview, we'll then delve into the passage a bit deeper and finish with what does it mean for us.

I'm going to take 20 minutes to tell you one thing and ask you another. Now for those, like me with a short attention span, here's the 20 second version: The one thing I'm going to tell you is that this passage, like the Olympic funding, is brutal but effective, we are placed in good soil and all God wants to see from us is good grapes, if we don't deliver good grapes the good soil will be taken from us. And the one thing I'm going to ask you is, what are your good grapes? That's it. To stay in the good soil yield good grapes, what are your good grapes.

Now the 20 minute version. Isaiah 5 1-7 a brutal but effective passage. What starts as a beautiful love song in verse 1 has already turned sour by the second half of verse 2, the second half of verse 2 just jars with what has gone before it, it doesn't sit well with us, and the prophet knows it jars with us, it riles us, its like something stuck between your teeth, mud in your eye hand, grit in your shoe.

And we the audience are called in to judge, and we love judging don't we? Be it Great British Bake Off, Strictly, or '[insert name]' of your favourite guilty pleasure talent show, we love a good judge and here we are asked to judge to opine to shed our great wisdom on this particular situation, – verse three judge between me and my vineyard, and the great thing about judging here is it is so clear, this will not take a lot of work.

Now always be wary, especially in the bible when you are asked to judge. Think of the way Nathan rebukes David in 2 Samuel , think of the good Samaritan in Luke 10, both have a similar set up, stories where we can all, without hesitation, point the finger at the guilty party... but each time, the big reveal at the end of the story leads to the hearer pointing the finger at themselves

Mt 7:v1-2 Do not judge, or you to will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you

Back to Isaiah 5: v4 'what more could have been done? We all know the answer, nothing could have been done and therefore what should we now do? Throw out the vines, yes throw out those useless ungrateful lazy good for nothing vines... and the climax of the passage verse 7, the big reveal, those vines you want to throw out, those useless ungrateful lazy good for nothing vines, those vines are me and you and you can sense the penny dropping, oh... bother, now in my head I don't think 'oh bother' captures the gravity of the situation, but I can't bring myself, in church at least, to really go for it with a traditional post water shed expletive, but you get the picture... those things we said throw out, those things are us...

So let's look at this passage in a little more detail

Verse 1 we get a love song and it's amazing, it tells of this great and generous businessman who has a vineyard, a businessmen with a vineyard, I'm liking him already, and, wow look at this, it's not just a vineyard, it's on fertile ground, and it's not just fertile ground, but very fertile ground, and not just on very fertile ground, but on very fertile ground on a hillside – no wonder Isaiah is singing

So the hillside great idea, as it means the vines will get more sunshine and will also get some of the sun reflected from the river below, and vines are pretty hardy things, almost like weeds because they can grow in very poor and very thin soil, so the fact that the soil is very fertile means that these vines are in 5 star accommodation

Oh it gets better still he's even cleared the area of stones, so the vines would be able to grow deep roots.

Later we also read that there was double protection around the vineyard, a hedge and a wall, and a watchtower in the vineyard and he'd even provided a wine press. I've actually been on a wine course a proper one with exams, and I'm not sure that the owner of the vineyard could have done anymore in setting up the perfect vineyard. Wow

Tell you what if Isaiah is singing whilst telling us about the vineyard, one can only imagine what he'll do once he gets to eat the grapes....

...oh hello, wasn't expecting that – 'wild grapes'

Now let's look at this carefully, and culturally unpack this, and to do that we need to take off our Islington filters and frames of reference, Isaiah's wild grapes are not the hugely sought after farmers market free range organic super grapes, these are not grapes, which have been foraged, by cotton glove wearing phd holding horticulturalists from spacious free spirited free range vines. The wild grapes here are not good grapes but bad.

The word used here is derived from the Hebrew verb 'to be offensive, to corrupt, to putrefy, to decay, to rot and is supposed, by one commentator Gesenius to be monk's hood a poisonous herb, offensive in smell, which produces berries which look like grapes but are not (2 Ki 4:39-41). Not only are the bad they are deceptive, they look like grapes but are not

Make no mistake, these are bad grapes. Hmm well he's not singing now is he?

Bad grapes, but how? He got the location right, the soil right, there was a wall, and a hedge and a watch tower. What went wrong, he is perplexed and rightly so... So he asks, hey Jerusalem, hey Israel, what else could I have done?

Well the answer is clear, absolutely nothing. The only thing at fault here are the vines.

That's a bit gutting isn't it, you can appreciate how let down he must feel. After all that investment, after giving them everything they needed to thrive, the businessman got a zero return and so makes the commercial and logical decision shut up shop and leave the vines to their own devices.

And the people of Judah agree, there is nothing in the passage to suggest they questioned the vineyard owner's judgement, all that investment, bad grapes, leave the vines.

Well let's thank God we don't have any vines or live in a vineyard. Oh dear, it's a parable, the vines are the nations of Israel and the people of Judah. The good news is, this is on the Old Testament, so probably doesn't apply to us...

Mt 7:19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire

Lk 3:9 The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire

Jn 15:5-6 I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

If ever there was a motivation for getting your five a day this is those are the passages

So with echoes of the Garden of Eden back in Genesis 3, God says okay you want to go it alone, you do not want my input, I'll give you what you want, I'll take away the protection, I won't prune or cultivate you, thorns and briers will grow. And this is a prophecy about the fall of Jerusalem.

Once again, whilst the way we conduct our individual lives is important, the criticism here is how we live our corporate lives, it's not just about who we are, but what we do – v7 he looked for justice, but saw only bloodshed, he looked for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. The words don't do that

justice, think about how you felt the last time you heard someone cry in distress, it's unnerving, it's uncomfortable, it's difficult to ignore and yet these were the cries rising from Jerusalem.

So what does it mean for us, in 2016 Islington? Well the clear question is, are we yielding fruit? This isn't just about not doing bad stuff, this is about doing good stuff – 'awks' – we love a good think here don't we, and even a good chat after the service, down the pub or in homegroups, but perhaps we should consider the prophet Elvis who called for 'a little less conversation and a little more action please – say what you like about Elvis but he was a polite young man 'a little more action - please'

Are we like the prophet compelled to sing God's praises, and I don't mean 'and we now come to the part our service where we all stand and join together in sung worship' I mean when was the last time we felt compelled to sing God's praises? Are we like the character in Emmanuel's song 'From the sun rise, to the sunset, do we praise his name?

When we get up in the morning do we first check out our phones or check in with God? Would God's instagram or facebook feed be cleverly curated with lots of pictures of sun rises, doves, lions laying down with lambs or would he be asking why his children don't speak to him or share their toys with others?

Maybe we shouldn't sing God's praises? Maybe we are not as fortunate as the vines in that vineyard?

I mean it's not as if we live in, what is without doubt, the best bit of one of the richest most vibrant cities in the world and are rich enough not only to work here but to enjoy leisure time here.

It's not as if we have benefitted from a high standard of education and healthcare, have more than enough food on our tables and clothes on our backs.

It's not as if we have eyes to see, ears to hear and legs to carry us.

It's not as if we are free to worship, in a safe place where we can share in and contribute to the community of other believers.

It's not as if because of the generosity of others we have this building and benefit from the structure and resources of the church of England.

It's not as if we live in a democracy rather than a corrupt state.

It's not as if we have running water, electricity, sanitation, a fire service, a police service and national health service.

It's not as if we have a God who seeks us, forgives us, redeems us, and gives us our daily bread.

So what are these good grapes? Well we can get a pretty good idea from the six 'ah's' in verses 8-23.

Unfortunately our church bibles use 'ah' where most others use 'woe'. Now far be it for me to criticise the many scholars and learned people who translated the New Revised Standard Version, sorry the Anglicised New Revised Standard Version, but I feel that 'ah' just doesn't capture the message.

Now I appreciate that woe is one of those old fashioned words which makes us think of over dramatic actors hamming it up 'oh woe is me...'

In the bible woes are never uplifting, but we can in essence we can think of a woe as a warning, it's not a final judgement, but a visit to the head masters office which has led one commentator to say 'better a woe from God than a welcome from the devil.

My Bible Dictionary defines a woe as God 'deploring the miserable condition in God's sight of those he is addressing. Their wretchedness lies not least in the fact that they are living in a fool's paradise, unaware of the misery that awaits them.

Were I to have translated this passage I'd have replaced the rather warm and cosy 'ah', with 'Shame on you'. That would certainly get my attention in the head masters office..

So let's have a look at these woes, the stuff that is stopping the vines bear good grapes. We haven't got time to look at all six, but we will look at three v8, v11 and v21

V8 Shame on you who join house to house and add field to field until there is room for no one but you and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land.

Well we've all been there haven't we buying a huge swathes of property in Islington, forcing others out of Islington and forcing others south of the river and forcing some out of London altogether. Shame on us.

Remember the context, Isaiah is talking to Israel, and the OT rules are that land is not owned but leased and returned to its owners in the jubilee year. Psalm 24 begins 'The earth is the Lords and everything in it, the world and all who live in it'. But Jerusalem had become a rather twisted market economy and there was a growing inequality of wealth and social injustice... sounds a bit like London...

This also has echoes of the Parable of the Rich fool in Lk 12 – they guy who had so much stuff he tore down his barns to build bigger ones.

The bad fruit here is clear, storing up treasure on earth, being blind to inequality and oppression (zero hours contract anyone), being selfish rather than selfless. Clearly misusing very fertile land we find ourselves in. Being bad stewards of our assets, not using our gifts, our things our material wealth, which God gives us, for the benefit of others.

What becomes of the materially minded? Well it doesn't take long to find out. Verse 10 their 10 acre vineyard will produce only a bath tub of wine, our own efforts of futile, all blessing comes from God, if we don't remain in him we produce nothing.

I find this woe very challenging, I regularly find that materialism is an insidious gas, and Helen regularly has to rescue me with Godly wisdom. I remember a few years ago, I was thinking about changing jobs, I'd been approached by another bank and was saying to her that I think I'd be satisfied if took this job, it was a bigger job, more money that sort of thing and she just looked at me with pity and woe in her eyes, she said where are we? On holiday, where on holiday? Thailand, on a beach, drinking cocktails, although to be fair both of us were recovering from a particularly gruelling Thai massage, in the spa.... you know the ones where they really dig in..

Was I making a sensible career decision, was I making a sensible life decision? Was I being a good and faithful servant seeking a bigger return for my Lord was I or joining house to house or field to field. Was I focusing on building God's kingdom or was I distracted by building my own?

V11-12 Shame on you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine, whose feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine, but do not regard the deeds of the Lord or see the work of his hands

This is people who live in gay abandon enjoying the fertile ground but with no regard from where it comes from or the deeds of Gods hand.

This woe builds on the opening verses of the first chapter Isaiah 1v3 The ox knows his master, the donkey the owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

Now one could be forgiven for forgetting the small things. I know my car's owner's manual says check the tire pressures before every journey, very sensible it will lead to longer tire life, better fuel economy and may prevent an accident, but I very rarely check the tire pressures, I might if I remember have a cursory glance to see if all the tires appear to have air in, but I don't forget the big things, like drive on the left, so much so, usually once or twice when on holiday overseas in a left hand drive car I will find myself driving on the wrong side of the road before the look of a bemused local grabs my attention or Helen politely asks me what I am doing

So if we don't forget the big things in life, why do we forget the big things of God, why do we not regard his deeds or the works of his hands? Why do we wake up in the morning and check out our phones before checking in with God? How many of us say the Lords prayer every day? How many of us say grace before every meal? These might seem trivial things, but they are not.

How is it possible that I never forget to get dressed each day or eat breakfast lunch and dinner and yet I very, very frequently forget to thank God for providing both my clothes and my food? We have three times a day to thank God three times a day to remember that he provides our daily bread three times a day to regard his deeds and see the work of his hands, three times a day to thank him for the very fertile land he has placed us on.

I find routine helps, I walk to work and that is my morning prayer time, I will say the Lord's prayer two or three times, as I often get halfway through it and realise I am not really listening or thinking about what I am saying, I walk past Church on my way to work and that is a trigger to pray for COTC, but take me out of that routine and I easily forget... shame on me...

Why do we forget to regard his deeds and see the works of his hands, well I think it is linked to the 5th woe in v21.

Shame on you, shame on you who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight. This is that proud intellectualism, the kind that isn't so much evil as godless. The sort that says oh yes we use the New Revised Standard Version of the bible, not the NIV, and not just the NRSV, but the Anglicised NRSV... How many of us are guilty of that? I mean look at me standing up here pretending to be wise and clever, I'm even worse, just a few minutes ago, before you I claimed that I could improve on the translation of the NRSV..... Shame on Me..

Now, I'm not clever or wise, I have read several parts of several commentaries and several parts of several books on Isaiah and prayed several times asking God what several things he wants to say to us this evening. But if you have heard any truth or any wisdom from me this evening, it is because of God's grace and God's spirit working in you, it is down to his deeds and his hands not mine.

And yet how often do we remember God, how often do we remember we are not wise. How often do we believe we are in control, how often do we forget we cannot add a single hour to our lives. The smart thing to do is to realise we owe everything to God and that we can do nothing without him, the smart thing is to focus on the one who made us the one who does provide for us the one who can forgive us

The problem we face is pride. I stand in front of a congregation of over achievers , both academically and creatively and some of you both creative and academic. I shudder to think much talent is within this room, our congregation has everyone from movie stars to doctors, there are a lot of people here with a lot of really grown up jobs and a lot of people punching above their weight.

Our education system, our jobs our society will tell us that our achievements are just that, ours. But there is a danger that we misuse that very fertile soil on that hillside, we start believing that it is us who are fertile rather than the soil in which we are placed.

When I was on that beach thinking about that job, it was clear, even to me, that I didn't need that job or the money that came with it, but that achievement gene in me or probably more accurately that pride gene in me wanted that job, perhaps I wanted that deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from my own achievements. If I'm to be totally honest probably a bit of me wanted that job, not because I needed it, but because it would annoy me if someone else got it, it would imply that that there was someone out there better for that job than me... I know, madness right – you see there I go again.. How childish, how true and how wild a grape.

it matters not whether I am top or bottom of the class, God has given us all gifts, as CS Lewis said, boasting about our abilities is no different to boasting that you have blue eyes or blond hair. As we heard last week from John our key aim is to glorify God and to fully enjoy him forever, to praise God not ourselves and to fully enjoy him forever, to yield good grapes and to stay in the vineyard...

Charles Spurgeon commented that those who are wise in their own sight are fools he said

'we are often wantonly thoughtless with regard to the present, we waste life as though it had no relation to eternity, as though time were only meant for pastime, The future too is equally unthought upon, the bright or the terrible future, the heaven eternal or the hell unending..

How often do we forget that our primary goal is to glorify God, to yield good grapes, and to enjoy him forever, how often do we think about eternity? What is more important to think about, what we will wear today or where we will be tomorrow?

In closing let us remember we are currently placed in very fertile soil with everything we need for a fruitful life. That is not to say that life will be plain sailing. We all have experienced choppy waters and stormy conditions. However, I'm sure the vines did not like getting soaked in rain, but without it they would die. I'm sure the vines don't like getting pruned, but by being pruned they yield more fruit. Pruning is hard, but it comes from the hand of a God who loves us, cares for us and wants to save us.

The vine has to do one thing and one thing alone yield good fruit, and we have to glorify God. This passage is a warning, no fruit, no very fertile soil. A warning as brutal as it is effective

So in closing, how should we heed or consider this warning? Well I believe we just need to ask ourselves a few questions:

When was the last time we thanked God for the very fertile soil in which he placed us?

Which fruit can we point to that suggests we are seeking to glorify God and build God's kingdom rather than our own?

Are we making life more comfortable for others or ourselves?

Do we daily take time to regard the deeds of the Lord and the work of his hands?

Are we wise in our own sight or wise enough to know that the wise person admires God rather than themselves?