

SERMON - Parable of the Vineyard - Matt. 21:33-42, August 26, 2018

The parable spoken by our Savior today was directed to the Jews who hated Him and wanted to see Him dead. In Scripture Israel is often referred to as a vineyard. The Jews are the stewards put in charge of the vineyard, whose task it was to care for Israel, until such time as the Messiah would come. It was the Lord's intention that through Israel all mankind would come to know God. The Jews proved unworthy of this task, and salvation for the Gentiles would have to wait until the coming of the Messiah. The Jews fell short many times in their sacred responsibility as the people of God. From time to time, when it was necessary, God sent prophets to the Jews to admonish them, with the hope that the Jews would repent and correct themselves when they went astray. Instead they beat and killed the Prophets. Ultimately God sends His only Son, with the hope that they will listen to Him and repent of their sins. Obviously when Holy Scripture says "the Jews," it referred only to those Jews who hated and were jealous of our Lord. Many Jews believed in and followed the Lord, including Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and the twelve apostles (except Judas, of course). Unfortunately, the Sanhedrin, and the Jews in authority, for the most part, rejected our Lord and wanted Him dead. The Jews who believed in Him, for the most part, did so in secret, out of fear. We all know what happened to the Lord and what was done to Him. Love, forgiveness and salvation were answered with hatred, jealousy and murder.

When I think of this parable and how it relates to our own times, I can't help but think of the Bolsheviks and Communists who hated God and persecuted the Orthodox Church with such vehemence and evil. I recently returned from visiting Russia. I saw first hand magnificent churches that were bombed, desecrated and destroyed by the Communists, now only crumbling shells with fragments of their former magnificence remaining. I visited a place called Butova. It was here that a massive number of Russians and people of other nationalities were brutally murdered by the Communists. They are all buried in a common grave. There are walls, much like the Vietnam memorial in Washington, with the names, positions and nationalities of everyone who was murdered there. There are bishops, priests, deacons, as well as Jews, Poles and even Moslems, people from all walks of life. There is a chilling and startling memorial sign with photographs of many of those who were killed, putting a face to this horrible atrocity and making it very real. I visited Yekaterinburg and the church which was built on the spot where the house stood which was the place of execution of the Royal family. I saw in a museum a facsimile of the room of their execution, the walls destroyed by the massive amount of bullets fired into the sacred bodies of the Royal family. I visited the place where the bodies of the Royal Martyrs were dismembered, burned and buried in mine shafts in a forest. Today a memorial church stands in this forest, and the quiet beauty of this forest and the flowers which grow from the grass covered mine shafts make it hard to believe and fathom the ugly and horrible atrocity that occurred at this place. I also saw many incredible and magnificent churches and cathedrals which have been rebuilt and restored to their former beauty and splendor. I visited many monasteries and saw and met many faithful monastics, clergy and lay people. On the 100th anniversary of the martyrdom of the Royal family, I was in Yekaterinburg at the place of their execution. Patriarch Kyrill and numerous bishops and clergy served an outdoor liturgy for 100,000 faithful Russian Orthodox Christians, repenting for what their forefathers did, and praying with great fervor and faith, asking for the prayers and intercessions of the martyred Royal family. Patriarch Kyrill gave a rousing sermon denouncing the barbarity and cruelty of the Godless atheist Bolsheviks and Communists. The Patriarch himself led all of us in an all night procession by foot from the place of execution to the place of burning and burial in the mine shafts. It brought tears to one's eyes to see the elderly Patriarch walking the entire distance by foot, leading a sea of faithful Russian Orthodox carrying icons and banners and singing hymns, paying homage to the Royal martyrs.

In 1918, when the Grand Duchess St. Elizabeth the New Martyr was in exile, she wrote to the sisters of her convent, "Be closer to each other, be as one single soul, wholly devoted to our Lord, and say, as did Saint John Chrysostom: *Glory to God for everything....* You must draw closer to God. The Lord says, *My son, give me thine heart and let thine eyes observe My ways...* {If you do this} then you can be sure that you have given everything to God because you have given Him your heart, and that means your very self." May we all give our hearts to God, and all the love, faith and devotion that is humanly possible. Amen.