In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson is one of the many readings throughout Holy Scripture that includes some very hard words in it, perhaps even words that are frightening to us. Jesus tells a parable about the Kingdom of God, and after telling the parable he summarizes it in these words:

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.” (Matthew 21:43)

These words are indeed frightening: Jesus warns that those who do not produce the fruit of the Kingdom of God will have the Kingdom taken away. In this sermon I intend to look at this parable, and Jesus’ interpretation of it, and see what it is that Jesus wants us to hear. What hope do we have in this? Well, let us look to the parable itself and see.

In this parable Jesus takes up the song of Isaiah from our Old Testament lesson, in which the Lord calls the House of Israel his vineyard. These are Isaiah’s words,

“the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;” (5:7; NRSV)

Jesus repeats what Isaiah had said at the beginning of this song, telling us that God had planted a vineyard, and expended much labor for this vineyard. Like the love-song from Isaiah, it seems that there was nothing more that could have been done for this vineyard. The owner built a fence around it, built a tower in the middle to protect it, he dug a wine press so that the fruit would have a purpose and not go to waste. So too, the Lord had chosen the people of Israel to be his very own, called them from amongst the nations to be his light to the world. He had brought them out of Egypt and through the wilderness, and planted Israel in the place that he had prepared for them. Along the way he gave the Law to be as a wall for them, keeping them from the idolatry of the nations around them, and when they strayed from the friendship that God had established with them, he sent the prophets to call them back to himself, he sent the prophets to call them back to the fullness of life that he had prepared for them.

But when the prophets were sent to them, Israel rejected them. So too in the parable. The owner sent servants to the vineyard to collect its fruits, but they were beaten or stoned or even killed. But the owner was patient with the tenants, he did not send an army to destroy the tenants with the vineyard, as you or I might have done if this were our vineyard. Instead, he sent even more servants, giving the tenants an opportunity for repentance, time to reconsider their actions. But the tenants did the same, worse than the
first time. But the owner continued to be patient, patient to the point of foolishness. The tenants beat, stone and kill the servants, so he sends his son? What folly is this?

In our Old Testament lesson, the Lord asks a question through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah. The Lord had done everything for his vineyard to flourish, for his vineyard to bear rich fruit. What more could the Lord have done? The obvious answer in the Old Testament is: nothing. There is nothing else that the Lord could have done for Israel. Well, it turned out that there was one more thing that the owner of this vineyard could do to make the vineyard flourish, to produce the fruits of the Kingdom. This was something that Isaiah could never have imagined, that he could not have dreamed. It was something that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9; Isaiah 64:4). What Isaiah could not have conceived before the fullness of time, the one thing more that the Lord could do for his vineyard was to send his very own Son to tend the vine.

And there was one more thing that the Son could do for the vineyard, he could die, he could die so that the vineyard could live. And, as he foretells in our parable, this Son would be taken out of the vineyard, he would be taken outside of the gates of Jerusalem, God’s holy city. And there, Jesus, the Son sent to tend the vineyard, he would be killed, he would be put to death by those who refused to produce the fruits of the Kingdom of God. This death was indeed folly, it was utter foolishness. But, as St. Paul says in the First Letter to the Corinthians, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1:25). This foolishness of God was the utterly and entirely surprising answer to Isaiah’s question. What more could the Lord have done for his people, what more could God have done for humankind? Jesus Christ is God’s unexpected, unforeseen, unhoped-for answer to Isaiah’s question. Jesus Christ is God’s impossible answer to the plight of Israel and of humankind. What more could God do for the vineyard, what more could God do for Israel and for humankind? God himself could come, and God himself could die for the vineyard. God himself could bear the death of humankind’s inhumanity, he could be cut off like a worthless branch and destroyed.

But this death was not the end of the Son, for this Son would be raised from death. And as Jesus’ death was not his end, so too would his death not be the end of hope for the vineyard. It was precisely in Jesus’ death that the Lord answered the cries of the psalmist from our Psalm for this morning: “Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine” (80:14). By his death Jesus lives now to forever tend the Lord’s vineyard, Jesus lives for his people. Jesus took the Kingdom away from those wicked tenants, so that he himself could be the one who tends the vineyard.

Jesus, by his death and resurrection, not only lives to be the one who tends the vine—he does this, he tends the vine himself—but more than just this. Jesus, by his life, death and resurrection, became the very vine itself. As Jesus says in the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, “I am the Vine, you are the branches, apart from me, you can do nothing.” Jesus’ death and resurrection was the beginning of hope for the vineyard. We are not left to ourselves to attempt to produce the fruit of the Kingdom. We are not left to our own devices to cut away the bad fruit that we produce. We are not dependant upon our own motivation or excitement or inspiration to live a life of repentance and faithfulness. We come to Jesus, we come to the Vine, so that his life and Spirit might flow through us, as the life of a vine flows through its branches.
This is the context in which Jesus’ words to the Pharisees come to us. Jesus tells the Pharisees, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43). These words are less of a warning to us than they are a promise to us. Jesus is promising that he will not leave his vineyard. He will not leave his Church in the hands of wicked tenants, he tends to the life of his branches himself.

We say again with the psalmist, “Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine” (80:14). In Jesus Christ, God has turned to us, and in Jesus Christ God is turning us back to himself. In Jesus Christ, God has not only looked down on us from heaven, as the psalmist asked. More than this, in Jesus Christ God himself has come down from heaven. And he has beheld us, he has looked at humankind in all of its unloveliness and its estrangement, and he has loved us and given himself for us and to us.

And as we gather together, Jesus Christ does this again and again. We confess our sins, we confess that we do not live as we ought, that we do not produce the fruits of the Kingdom, in essence we say that we need God himself to tend to us, we are in bondage and cannot free ourselves, we need another to come and set us free. And Jesus himself tends to us, he forgive our sins, he beholds us and continues to hold us in his love. We then gather around the Word and the Table, coming to hear Jesus’ own words to us and to eat his body and blood given and shed for us. We come to Jesus himself, so that we might hear and taste and see that the Lord, the Lord he is Good. And as we do this, Jesus himself tends to us, we encounter him in all his goodness and we discover that we are being made good, we are being made more and more like Christ Jesus. We come to this table, trusting that Jesus himself going to tend to us, that he is removing from us what is unlovely, that he is removing from us what is not fitting for one of his branches, and he makes us his own over and over again. He makes us more and more into his very own Body, filled with his life and Spirit, and we go forth in peace into the world, reconciled to God and to one another, testifying to the world that the life of the world is Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God, not and forever. Amen.