

18<sup>th</sup> After Trinity 08.10.23 St John and St Stephen's Reading Holy Communion Isaiah 5:1-7 & Matthew 21:33-end. *When the harvest fails.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fyJDoC4svs&t=2304s>

The clip above shows Martijn Doolaard, a 40-year-old Dutchman, who is painstakingly renovating two stone cabins in the Italian Alps. He bought them for very little in 2021, and has been working for nearly two years, releasing a weekly video of his progress every Sunday. Because he's a skilled craftsman he's basically making everything by hand, including his own scaffolding!

There are currently more than 100 videos on his You Tube channel with over 58 million views. He's become something of a phenomenon because of his very thorough and mindful approach to the renovation. Some call it 'slow TV' because lots of the film is simply him digging, shovelling, chopping, sawing, plane-ing, varnishing, measuring, hammering and looking silently at the astonishing view.

I thought of him as soon as I read the phrase, in the Isaiah passage, 'he dug it and cleared it of stones'. We saw Martijn doing just that – and in that episode he also has to rebuild things he'd built that had blown away in a terrific alpine storm. It's the care he takes which people find so mesmerising, and the fact that his thousands of hours of film, taking in beautiful snow-swept views as well as the rougher end of rain, fog and sleet, show just how long it takes to build something in a bespoke manner, with skill and even love.

Renovation programmes are all the rage, and have been for a while. Whether it was Sarah Beeny giving advice to hapless couples who'd waded in and knocked down a retaining wall by mistake, or Phil Spencer and Kirsty Allsop battling it out to see if her renovation project would win out over his advice to sell the ugly house, we all love a bit of renovation.

And then there's Nick Knowles and his DIY SOS team – always a weepy - in this programme they're invested in creating something good-looking and practical that will benefit a hard-up family in some way. There's always a lot of emotion on that show, because the reveal is such an amazing surprise; the beneficiaries are overwhelmed with all the care that's been taken, and it makes for very good telly.

And these examples represent 100s of hours work squeezed into one hour of good TV, whereas in the case of Martijn Doolaard, we're 101 videos in and the finished product is still months away. But the half a million subscribers who are all willing him on, are happy to wait and see the conclusion unfold, in real time, as it were.

In this song of lament from Isaiah, we see a building project that ended badly. This is a love song not for a person, but for a piece of land – land on which the beloved built a vineyard. 'He dug it and cleared it of stones...he built a watchtower...and hewed out a vine vat in it'. You can feel the sense of anticipation. This is not just going to be

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a beautiful space to look at – the point of all this work, all this effort, is grapes – that is, wine!

There's a good word for 'what's the point?' in Greek. '*Telos*'. It means the 'end' of something, but not just the moment it's finished, it's the 'reason for its existence, as it were. Someone will sometimes say the phrase 'to what end?' and it's a big question. When the rich farmer stored up all his abundant crops in huge barns and then died, we rightly ask 'to what end?' What was it all *for*? It's a theological question as well as an existential one.

The *end*, the *point* of a vineyard, is wine. Wine that you can drink, wine that you can savour, wine that you can sell, even. (But, and it's a big *but*) 'he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes'. Wild grapes (I looked this up) look very like cultivated grapes but are in effect weeds; normally unpalatable or even poisonous. In other words, after all that work, all that sweat, all that digging and hewing, building, planning, preparing and anticipating (to the point where his mouth was watering) – there was no fruit and no harvest. No wonder it's a song of lament.

It makes me think of our forecourt space out the front of the church. We're seeing here a lot of potential for outreach and a similar potential for mis-use. Overhanging bushes for shade, the smart noticeboard, the weeded tiles, the new planting: it's all lovely. If we imagine, in addition, new murals and freshly varnished benches – then imagine one day we come down and instead of being able to sit outside and have the outdoor service, we find everywhere litter, dog mess and evidence of drugs. The benches are ripped out and the murals defaced. No one can use the space that morning.

It's that sense of disappointment that rings through the Isaiah passage. The unfruitful vineyard is a picture of God's people. The people of Judah are described as 'his pleasant planting'. But instead of grapes, there were weeds. Instead of a people living peacefully, God found a people addicted to violence. 'He expected justice, but saw bloodshed'. It's the situation facing the Ukrainian people, experiencing a bitter harvest of the oppression and invasion that's been meted out to them.

And there's a vineyard in the gospel too. The tenants of this vineyard, instead of handing over the crops at the due time, kill the landowner's emissaries and even his son, in their attempt to keep the harvest to themselves. In this parable it seems the harvest is on time and plentiful, but effectively this too is a tale of a failed harvest, as it never benefits the person who was due its fullness.

As a biblical metaphor, harvest is not always something to be looked forward to. You'll be familiar with the saying 'we reap what we sow'. In terms of our stewardship of the earth, the failure of harvests globally is a very real threat due to soil

degradation. There are various estimates of how long global harvests can be relied upon – and figures of 100 years, 60 years or even just 30 years more are variously quoted. Before reading further into this very worrying area, I was struck by those figures – 100, 60, 30 – diminishing returns – and the very opposite of the abundance alluded to in the parable of the Sower, where the crops that fell on good soil produced 30, 60 and some even 100-fold.

So whether the harvest fails due to bad luck or bad management, harvest is an important topic for us to consider with regard to the management of our resources, both physical and spiritual. What do we need to pay attention to as a church, at this time of year, when the actual harvest is being (we hope) 'safely gathered in'.

A couple of thoughts – and you will perhaps have your own about 'harvesting' in church life. Firstly, don't forget to enjoy the harvest. God is kind and has brought much fruit to this church and I think there's a lot more to come. We have, by God's grace, so many things in place already and a high proportion of volunteers giving time and effort into the many things we're associated with as a church.

With a bit more fertilizer (that is, *prayer*) these things will bear more fruit. If you're a 'doing' type (and I think there's quite a few of us here!) don't miss the harvest celebration. Because after the work, we sit down and enjoy the fruit. After the harvest, that's it (for a little while). That's why church lunches are special. Even though they do take a lot of work, the end product – the sitting down to enjoy food together with no other agenda – is really worth it. Let's not be people who are so busy doing that we don't stop to enjoy. To savour.

And secondly, we invite others into the enjoyment. I don't think the Church needs any more bright ideas about further projects to pursue, either here, or nationally. Everyone's diaries are too full already. You know how it is – the more emails you get, the less time you spend reading each one. It's a law of the universe. More is less and less is more!

Stopping and resting and looking and seeing, and waiting for things to unfold and then saying thank you to God while we enjoy his goodness – these are things that will bless others. The quality of our relationships and the fact we can stop and spend time enjoying each other's company and friendship – these are things that people are naturally drawn to. This is what will win people to Christ.

This is the invitation this morning: come and enjoy - and share - the harvest.

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