

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19
Hebrews 11:29–12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 5: 1 - 7

This passage, known as “The Song of the Vineyard” is one of the most familiar from the Book of Isaiah. The land of Israel has very few flat areas for cultivation; most of the land consists of mountains and hills. To be able to grow enough food, many hills and mountains were terraced. The process of creating these terraces was long and arduous. Rather than simply piling up the dirt, each terrace consisted of layers (see photo right). The lowest layer was rocks of limestone. Limestone’s composition keeps anything from growing in it was set in place as a barrier to prevent weeds or undesired



plants from growing in place of the crops to be sewn. Another layer served as a cushion between the limestone and the earth in which the crops were planted. Finally, rich soil was placed on top. What is especially important to remember is that several years passed between the time that each layer was set in place. This was done to “season” each layer properly. What this meant was that very few, if any, people ate fruit from vines or trees that grew in a terrace that they began. One built a terrace for the benefit of the generations yet unborn.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of hillsides in the Holy Land are still covered in these ancient terraces. Often, a watchtower was built so that the village’s crops were not stolen by thieves. The ruins of such a watchtower can be seen in the photo at right.



In the Song of the Vineyard, God has patiently guided the people of Israel for many years and through many trials. Yet for all his love and in spite of all that he has done for them, the people persisted in their evil ways. Note that it is not the worship of other gods that is condemned, as is the case with many other prophets. It is the people’s injustice and the lack of righteousness that breaks their relationship with God.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

Luke 12: 49 - 56

This Sunday's passage is one of the "hard sayings" of Jesus. To try to better understand what is happening here, there are two aspects that should be considered.

Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Arabic, often use overstatements to make a point. The language spoken in first century Israel, Aramaic, is a Semitic tongue and the same characteristic is true for it. Overstatements are far more easily recognized as such in our own speaking. After all, no matter how hungry we are, we seldom really want to eat a horse. A day may be full of hard work and difficulty but it only lasts twenty four hours; it does not last "forever". Again, the use of such overstatements is far more common in Semitic languages than they are in English. (As an aside, if this fact were kept in mind it would avoid some of the misunderstandings between Americans and the people of the modern Middle East.)

Another fact that is just as true today in the Middle East as it was in the first century has to do with the importance of family. We all love our families and it is difficult to imagine that anyone's bonds with their family members are closer than our own. Yet family ties in the Middle East are in fact closer and more interwoven with daily life than they are in the Western world. For example, we choose our own spouses where as in the east; spouses are still often selected by the parents. Yet before an arrangement is made formally, the father will consult with his own father, his brothers, his uncles, his wife's father, and his wife's brothers. All of these people must agree that the match is suitable. No one would dream of making any important decision without consulting the members of their family. One does not live in isolation; you live with your extended family and they are a part of everything you think and do.

These two conditions are in tension with one another in Jesus' words in this passage. On one hand, these are dramatic overstatements. On the other, Jesus is asking the unthinkable. Nothing is more important than the bonds within one's family. Where the true meaning lies between these two is difficult for those of us in another time and another culture to comprehend. One possibility is that Jesus is saying that after his ministry; after his death and resurrection, everything will be different.

It would be difficult for Jesus' hearers to imagine anything as different from their normal lives as the breaking of family bonds. Yet this is the image Jesus used. Everything, even this most basic core of our lives, will be changed. Jesus spoke these words as he prepared to go to Jerusalem to face the events of his Passion, the baptism he had to be baptized, and what stress he must have been under indeed. That stress was a burden he would carry all the way to the cross.

Perhaps the question for us today is whether or not Jesus' death and resurrection has made a basic difference in the core of our lives. Have they made any difference in us at all?