



The Holy See

OPENING MASS OF THE 11TH ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Sunday, 2 October 2005

Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The reading from the Prophet Isaiah and today's Gospel set before our eyes one of the great images of Sacred Scripture: the image of the vine. In Sacred Scripture, bread represents all that human beings need for their daily life. Water makes the earth fertile: it is the fundamental gift that makes life possible. Wine, on the other hand, expresses the excellence of creation and gives us the feast in which we go beyond the limits of our daily routine: wine, the Psalm says, "gladdens the heart". So it is that wine and with it the vine have also become images of the gift of love in which we can taste the savour of the Divine. Thus, the reading from the Prophet that we have just heard begins like a canticle of love: God created a vineyard for himself - this is an image of the history of love for humanity, of his love for Israel which he chose. This is therefore the first thought in today's readings: God instilled in men and women, created in his image, the capacity for love, hence also the capacity for loving him, their Creator. With the Prophet Isaiah's canticle of love God wants to speak to the hearts of his people - and to each one of us. "I have created you in my image and likeness", he says to us. "I myself am love and you are my image to the extent that the splendour of love shines out in you, to the extent that you respond lovingly to me". God is waiting for us. He wants us to love him: should not our hearts be moved by this appeal? At this very moment when we are celebrating the Eucharist, in which we are opening the Synod on the Eucharist, he comes to meet us, he comes to meet me. Will he find a response? Or will what happened to the vine of which God says in Isaiah: "He waited for it to produce grapes but it yielded wild grapes", also happen to us? Is not our Christian life often far more like vinegar than wine? Self-pity, conflict,

indifference?

With this we have automatically come to the second fundamental thought in today's readings. As we have heard, they speak first of all of the goodness of God's creation and of the greatness of the choice by which he seeks us out and loves us. But they then also speak of the story that was successively lived out - of the "fall" of man. God had planted the very best vines, yet they yielded wild grapes. Let us ask ourselves: what do wild grapes consist of? The good grapes that God was hoping for, the Prophet sings, would have been justice and righteousness. Wild grapes instead bring violence, bloodshed and oppression that make people groan under the yoke of injustice. In the Gospel, the image changes: the vine produces good grapes, but the tenants keep them for themselves. They are not willing to hand them over to the owner of the vineyard. They beat and kill his messengers and kill his son. Their motive is simple: they themselves want to become owners; they take possession of what does not belong to them. In the foreground of the Old Testament is the accusation of the violation of social justice, of contempt for human beings by human beings. In the background, however, it appears that with contempt for the Torah, for the law given by God, it is God himself who is despised. All people want is to enjoy their own power. This aspect is fully highlighted in Jesus' Parable: the tenants do not want to have a master - and these tenants are also a mirror of ourselves. We men and women, to whom creation is as it were entrusted for its management, have usurped it. We ourselves want to dominate it in the first person and by ourselves. We want unlimited possession of the world and of our own lives. God is in our way. Either he is reduced merely to a few devout words, or he is denied in everything and banned from public life so as to lose all meaning. The tolerance that admits God as it were as a private opinion but refuses him the public domain, the reality of the world and of our lives, is not tolerance but hypocrisy. But nowhere that the human being makes himself the one lord of the world and owner of himself can justice exist. There, it is only the desire for power and private interests that can prevail. Of course, one can chase the Son out of the vineyard and kill him, in order selfishly to taste the fruits of the earth alone. However, in no time at all the vineyard then reverts to being an uncultivated piece of land, trampled by wild boar as the Responsorial Psalm tells us (cf. Ps 80[79]: 14).

Thus, we reach a third element of today's readings. In the Old and New Testaments, the Lord proclaims judgment on the unfaithful vineyard. The judgment that Isaiah foresaw is brought about in the great wars and exiles for which the Assyrians and Babylonians were responsible. The judgment announced by the Lord Jesus refers above all to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. Yet the threat of judgment also concerns us, the Church in Europe, Europe and the West in general. With this Gospel, the Lord is also crying out to our ears the words that in the Book of Revelation he addresses to the Church of Ephesus: "If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (2: 5). Light can also be taken away from us and we do well to let this warning ring out with its full seriousness in our hearts, while crying to the Lord: "Help us to repent! Give all of us the grace of true renewal! Do not allow your light in our midst to blow out! Strengthen our faith, our hope and our love, so that we can bear good fruit!".

At this point, however, we ask ourselves: "But is there no promise, no word of comfort in today's readings and Gospel? Is the threat the last word?". No! There is a promise, and this is the last, the essential word. We hear it in the Alleluia verse from John's Gospel: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who lives in me and I in him will produce abundantly" (Jn 15: 5). With these words of the Lord, John illustrates for us the final, true outcome of the history of God's vineyard. God does not fail. In the end he wins, love wins. A veiled allusion to this can already be found in the Parable of the Tenants presented by today's Gospel and in the concluding words. There too, the death of the Son is not the end of history, even if the rest of the story is not directly recounted. But Jesus expresses this death through a new image taken from the Psalm: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone..." (cf. *Mt* 21: 42; *Ps* 118[117]: 22). From the Son's death springs life, a new building is raised, a new vineyard. He, who at Cana changed water into wine, has transformed his Blood into the wine of true love and thus transforms the wine into his Blood. In the Upper Room he anticipated his death and transformed it into the gift of himself in an act of radical love. His Blood is a gift, it is love, and consequently it is the true wine that the Creator was expecting. In this way, Christ himself became the vine, and this vine always bears good fruit: the presence of his love for us which is indestructible.

These parables thus lead at the end to the mystery of the Eucharist, in which the Lord gives us the bread of life and the wine of his love and invites us to the banquet of his eternal love. We celebrate the Eucharist in the awareness that its price was the death of the Son - the sacrifice of his life that remains present in it. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes, St Paul says (cf. *I Cor* 11: 26). But we also know that from this death springs life, because Jesus transformed it into a sacrificial gesture, an act of love, thereby profoundly changing it: love has overcome death. In the Holy Eucharist, from the Cross, he draws us all to himself (cf. *Jn* 12: 32) and makes us branches of the Vine that is Christ himself. If we abide in him, we will also bear fruit, and then from us will no longer come the vinegar of self-sufficiency, of dissatisfaction with God and his creation, but the good wine of joy in God and of love for our neighbour. Let us pray to the Lord to give us his grace, so that in the three weeks of the Synod which we are about to begin, not only will we say beautiful things about the Eucharist but above all, we will live from its power. Let us invoke this gift through Mary, dear Synod Fathers whom I greet with deep affection as well as the various Communities from which you come and which you represent here, so that, docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, we may help the world become in Christ and with Christ the fruitful vine of God. Amen.