

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

October 4, 2020

Isaiah 5:1–7 • Philippians 4:6–9 • Matthew 21:33–43

I.

Most people know of the *Pietà*, meaning “The Piety.”

It’s that beautiful sculpture by Michelangelo of the Virgin Mary holding her crucified Son, which sits in St. Peter’s Basilica (1498–1499).

That is actually one of three *Pietà* that Michelangelo sculpted.

The third and final one is called the *Bandini Pietà*, which the great artist sculpted toward the end of his life, between 1547 and 1555.

Unlike its more famous counterpart, the *Bandini Pietà* also includes the figures of Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus, which may be a self-portrait of the artist.

That sculpture is now being painstakingly cleaned in public view, so that visitors to the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo in Florence can see this work of art in all its glory.

Discoveries in the course of cleaning the statue were recently announced, and include the tool marks made by Michelangelo.

The *Bandini Pietà* has an interesting history.

Michelangelo intended this sculpture to be his tomb marker, but there was a problem with the block of Carrara marble he was using.

(By the way, the statues of St. Peter, St. Joseph, and St. Vincent de Paul here in the Cathedral are all made from that same kind of marble.)

Returning to Michelangelo,
 there was also another problem with the *Bandini Pietà*:
 Christ's left leg was never carved;
 Michelangelo may have run out of room.

In fit of anger,
 Michelangelo smashed the sculpture with a hammer.

The statue survived the artist's attack,
 which damaged Christ's left arm and other areas of the sculpture.

Happily, Michelangelo donated the sculpture to a student, who had it restored.

II.

That incident and turn of events call to mind the ending, and meaning,
 of today's Gospel:

“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you
 and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”

The life, presence, and activity of God—
 what we call “grace,” meaning, “gift”—
 cannot be stopped.

God will complete his loving plan for the world no matter what.

God's providence is strong of enough to withstand everything
 from sin to a pandemic;
 the Lord always accomplishes his work.

Part of that work is the paschal mystery:
 the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The parable in today's Gospel is a clear allegory about the paschal mystery:

“He sent his son to them, thinking,
 ‘They will respect my son.’
 But... they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ...
*The stone that the builders rejected
 has become the cornerstone.*”

The parable is also about more than the paschal mystery.

It also reflects the historical reality that many Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah or Christ, and so the Church became primarily Gentile or non-Jewish in a relatively short period of time:

“He... will lease his vineyard to other tenants
who will give him the produce at the proper times.”

The grace of God is dynamic, and it will find a way to flourish.

This is what God seeks for our lives:
for us to be men, women, and children who radiate holiness—
in reverence for God, in generous and joyful witness to the truth,
and in compassion toward those in need.

In the words of St. Paul from the Second Reading,

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious,
if there is any excellence
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.
Keep on doing what you have learned and received...
Then the God of peace will be with you.”

Spiritual flourishing takes time,
just as the artist carves a beautiful sculpture out of marble.
one stroke of the chisel at a time.

Amid the current pandemic,
many of us have the sense of “hanging on” or “hanging in there,”
until everything returns to normal.

We hope that will be soon, but none of us knows exactly when.

Our spiritual lives don't have to wait
until things can back to normal in order to flourish.

That would be discounting the power of God's grace.

Christians don't need the world to be perfect in order to become holy; the world has never been perfect.

God wants us to shine brightly right now, and he can do that in us.

Because the world needs witnesses.

We can draw strength from St. Paul's encouragement:

“Have no anxiety at all,
but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,
make your requests known to God.
Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

As you know,
we've been running a series of parishioner testimonies
about why they come to Mass.

It's called “Echoes of Faith.”

I was struck by what April Ruiz, a college student, said in her interview:

“Especially in Covid times,
I've realized how much the Eucharist really means to me...
[being] able to live in this world that we live in right now.
Mass and Jesus in the Eucharist have given me the ability
to be more like Christ in a world that really needs it.”

The Mass opens the floodgates for the torrent of grace to flow into our lives.

It is the renewal of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection,
and we are drawn into that sacrifice.

That is the power of God for us to flourish as Christians,
and to produce fruit for his kingdom.