

27th Sunday Year A

The American politician Adlai Stevenson II was born in 1900 and died in London in 1965. He was an able and intelligent politician, and a gifted speaker. The last 4 years of his life he spent as US ambassador to the United Nations. After his death, the writer and broadcaster Alistair Cooke said of Stevenson, "What he left behind was something more splendid, in a public man, than a record of power. It was simply an impression of goodness. He had mastered the art, far more difficult and rarer than that of a successful politician, writer, musician, actor: success as a human being."

When he was a boy of twelve Stevenson had been involved in a tragedy. He accidentally shot dead a sixteen year old friend while demonstrating drill technique with a rifle that had been accidentally left loaded. Stevenson was devastated by this event. Years later, in 1955, he heard of a woman whose son had experienced a similar tragedy. He wrote to her and told her to tell her son that "he must live for two". Here we have an insight into the spiritual force that lifted Stevenson into the ways of justice and goodness that came to mark his life. "We will not lose faith in the United Nations", he said in 1952. "We want it to become what it was intended to be – a world society of nations under law, not merely law backed by force, but law backed by justice and popular consent."

The integrity and the spiritual vision of an Adlai Stevenson are missing in characters portrayed in the Gospel story we read today. Jesus is telling a parable to the chief priests and elders of his time, but it is not just a story. It is a foretelling of the deceitful and murderous intentions of his listeners, who before long will turn to violence in order to rid themselves of this turbulent preacher. The story Jesus tells describes workers in the vineyard who, although they are tenant workers, behave as if they owned the place. When the owner, now abroad, sends servants to collect the produce, the workers are not impressed. It is their land now, they feel. The owner is not here. We do the work. We make the rules. They claim what they feel is theirs by violent action.

The parable will be played out most cruelly when Jesus is arrested, put on trial and sent to his death. Perhaps the elders, listening to the story, did not believe that they would do such a thing and did not recognise themselves in the tale. But the story came true and they did commit a crime of violence. For when people feel threatened by someone else they quickly resort to arms or violence

to defend what they feel is theirs, rightly or wrongly. Any climate of fear breeds repression and we will justify our actions simply because we are afraid.

The teaching of the Lord for us today in a world where fear and favour jostle for advantage is that we persevere in goodness and never let go of it. In the face of the forces gathering against him, Jesus reminds his listeners of the old saying, "it was the stone rejected by the builders that became the keystone". Violence will never win the day. Wrongdoing contains within itself the seed of its own destruction, and the Lord who went to the cross rose that we might live.

St Paul, writing to the Phillipians, promotes this way of goodness today. "Fill your minds with everything that is true", he tells us, "everything that can be thought virtuous." "Keep doing all the things that you learnt from me," he says. It is in this way that the God of peace will be with us. This is no easy commitment and we will need stout hearts to do as Paul urges us.

In our own times the temptation to act like the workers in the vineyard is ever present, to resort to power politics to sort out the world. Let the words of Adlai Stevenson be heard again. He said, "The early years of the United Nations have been difficult ones, but what did we expect ? That peace would drift down from the skies like soft snow ? That there would be no ordeal, no anguish, no testing, in this greatest of all human undertakings?"

If that remains true on the international stage, surely it remains true in our personal dealings. Commitment to gospel values will always be the mark of the Christian. Let prayer be our habit so that peace may be our reward.