**27th Sunday – Vines & Grace**

Vines and vineyards are seemingly part of God's domain. In Isaiah, the longest prophetical book in the Bible, we are reminded to produce good fruit. Some may prefer the wine. And the Gospel parable by the Lord also reminds us that God's vineyard will belong to those who produce his fruit. In short, the Lord is saying to the Jews that the kingdom will be taken from you and given to others if you don't accept me and my word.

Note also, that Jesus refers to himself as the Vine and we are his branches. Such typology reminds me of the apse in the Basilica of St Clement in Rome, now featured in the Compendium. It depicts a vast array of fruitful vines growing from the base or root stock – or in building terms, the foundation stone – which is drawing life from a teeming river of grace. The symbols are patently clear: Christ is the root stock and we belong by adoption in Baptism to him. As vines or laterals draw their existence and vitality from the stock, we draw our existence and fruitfulness from Christ by means of sanctifying grace in our souls. The river symbolic of grace as Christ's is the new Adam whose open side gives life to the Church, the new Eve.

God uses the natural world of water, vines and fruit to remind us of the super-natural world of grace, virtues and spiritual blessings. Such a world we connect to by means of prayer, as St Paul reminds us: *there is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it*. But before we pray, we need to be convinced of the existence of such a spiritual world. In October, we begin the month with a reminder of the existence of angels, with their feast days. Angels are spiritual persons, like us created by God to give him glory. Unlike us, they have no body, nor would they want one, being a superior being. What we share in common with them is sanctifying grace and our ability to reason and will. After death we don't become angels. For death is the separation of the body from the soul, and though we shall be body-less, for a time, until the final resurrection when we receive back our bodies in sublime perfection. But no, angels are vastly different to us homo sapiens. The difference is greater than the difference between us and animals, some say. How many choirs of angels exist? Scripture alludes to millions of them that are divided into nine choirs that are arranged into three hierarchies. The more sublime choirs, such as cherubim and seraphim don't deal with us humans, while our guardian angels are in the lowest choir.

Just as their existence baffles our spiritual minds, so too does the life of some saints and mystics, such as Saint Francis, whose feast is today. This young Italian of the thirteenth century from the province of Umbria, not only believed in angels and the spiritual life but spent his whole life drawing from the world of nature and animals to teach us about the spiritual. He used the transcendental properties of beauty and goodness that are manifest in nature so as to lift us up to their divine Source who is the all good and loving God.

It was Francis that utilised whatever means available to connect the natural to the supernatural. So he thought up the idea of the fourteen Stations of the Cross that feature on most Church walls in the world, in a world where few could read and write, as a graphic reminder of the sufferings and death of the Lord. Moreover, so imbued was he with the mystery of the Incarnation and the birth of our Saviour that he enacted the reality one Christmas with live animals, giving us our first Nativity Scene or Crib. The idea was a massive success, and still is, in Italy every Christmas.

The Franciscan spirit that permeated the world back then was so revolutionary that at the end of his life, eight hundred years ago this year, thousands were emulating his example. As his Order flourished with the approbation of Pope Gregory he was canonised only two years after his death. This is nothing other than the power of divine grace, that spiritual sap that flows from the stock of Christ to all God's faithful. St. Francis – pray for us!