

**Sour grapes**

*Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8*

In modern usage, when you say that someone's attitude is like sour grapes, you mean that they have said that something is worthless or undesirable because they want it themselves but cannot have it, so they 'rubbish' it. "I'll have that last piece of shortbread...oh, someone else took it? Well, it's probably fattening, and it wasn't very good in the first place." That sort of thing. That's sour grapes.

The derivation as I said in the earlier talk comes from Aesop's Fables, where a fox, after futile efforts to reach some grapes, scorns them as being sour.

The sour grapes referred to in the book of Jeremiah are of a very different nature. Jeremiah's is a metaphor for sin, for wrong doing, for turning your back on God. When we read: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge', it's a sign of despair. Possibly for generations, unless...

Actions have consequences. In our own time none can avoid the impact that humanity has had for centuries on the environment. Our ancestors taking, they thought, great strides forward in that march for progress in the industrial revolution could have had little concept of the cumulative effect of carbon emissions on the natural world. A polluted river here, a cut down forest there, would never have led to them thinking about rising temperatures and melting icecaps and devastating floods submerging nations. Who could have remotely imagined the consequences. 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge', it's a sign of despair. Possibly for generations, unless...

When Tim Berners Lee wrote his first proposal for the World Wide Web in 1989, it was conceived of as a document management system. The World Wide Web has been central to the development of the Information age and has been the central tool for billions of people to interact with the

Internet. It has enabled a staggering growth in knowledge and research and the sharing of communication and learning. If you do not have an internet presence through a website, you are almost invisible in just about every walk of life. Who would have thought even five years ago people would be able to beam in and watch morning worship at Morningside Parish Church. But it has also led to the theft of personalities and information, intruding into so much of our lives; it has seen an exponential growth of pornography and other forms of abuse; it has facilitated cybercrime and hacking that can bring organisations and countries to their knees. ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’, it’s a sign of despair. Possibly for generations, unless...

There are many who feel the mini budget of a few weeks ago, with its economic implications, has caused financial chaos in this country, with consequences not yet fully understood. Or the Russian war on Ukraine, and the unintended but still very real consequence of energy shortages, and grain shortages. ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’, it’s a sign of despair. Possibly for generations, unless...

So much of what we think, say, and do has consequences, and sometimes those consequences can last for generations. It can be numbing. It’s almost the same as saying, “What’s the point of trying – our ancestors have done wrong, and we are paying the price!”

It's certainly what the ancient people of Israel and Judah felt. Ripped from their holy homeland, no longer able to access their sacred temple by both physical distance and the devastating fact of its destruction, they surely thought their God had abandoned them or, worse still, had been defeated. Where was hope to be found? What was the point in believing or doing anything?<sup>i</sup>

We see it so often in history. Dark times come, globally, nationally, personally. There seems to be little if any hope. Then into this darkness a voice speaks with news as unforeseen as was the news that sent us into the darkness. The voice of hope that says there is light, no matter how deep the darkness. The irony is that it is often only in the darkness that we really notice light. There’s nothing to distract from it. Jeremiah, for the ancient people to whom he wrote lights a handle of hope that will help them to see that the darkness of exile will be rolled away. They have not been

forgotten. They have not been cast aside. They are not on their own. They would be able to turn around and face God again. Their fate was not inescapable. Something could and would be done, by God, with them and for them.

Sour grapes may set teeth on edge for a time, maybe a long time. Bad things happen with terrible consequences for a time, maybe a long time. But the promise of God is that hope comes, despite everything. Not always in ways we expect. Not always in ways we might like, or even want, but the presence of God moves us on. To do something. To change something. To accept something. And to move on into a different future. It's how the Jeremiah reading starts: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord."

It seems a bit banal: of course, the future is coming. That's what the future does! But it's a future God shapes again and again to help us, work with us, through the sour grape time and into the sweetness and wholesomeness of a better life.

Yes, of course, we'd all prefer sunlit uplands, and calm, and order, and unchecked progression and improvement. But life isn't like that because we humans, often the problem in life, are not like that. But whatever we are like, God is constant. And when we go wrong, when life goes wrong, God brings us back to a steady place, so that we might begin again.

Not a turning back of the clock. Not a wave of a magic wand making everything as it was before. Not a wrapping up in divine cotton wool to protect us from future mistakes. But a promise that with us there will be a building up and a planting again.

A promise that is based on perpetual forgiveness, because we need perpetual forgiveness. And a promise to keep bringing us to another starting point, and a time to start again, and again, until at last we might get some things right, and move on. God offers God's children this new relationship that we can live in to, not a standard we must live up to, because God will give us a new heart and a new spirit and a new determination to keep on trying.

Jesus knew this perpetual forgiving nature of God. Unlike an unjust judge, who only gave justice to the importunate widow because she kept bothering him; so, God, never unjust, hears all of our cries, day, and night, and will come to us in God's good time. Not always with the help we ask for, not always with the help we presume God should give, not even when we demand it and set the timetable, but God comes with help, and understanding, and hope, nevertheless.

The time of sour grapes is not forever. But better times will come, as we learn to cope alongside our God Who wants us to work alongside, and not to give up, and learn, and grow.

The challenge for us all, and it is not an easy one, is to work to God's timetable, and not ours, and to keep on working, and to keep on making a difference, and to keep on hoping, and to keep on believing, until we find the sourness of life turns slowly, or quickly, to sweetness. Because God has been with us, working with us, holding us, helping us, steadying us, and all things will work together for good, as God consistently promises.

Keep steady. Keep hopeful. Keep working. Keep God. And recognise that help is coming. In fact, maybe help is here already.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> W Hulitt Glower, Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 4, p171