

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## On the Production of Fruit

The wicked tenants in today's Gospel refuse to yield the fruit that was asked of them; so the owner of the vineyard dispossesses them, and gives the vineyard into the hands of "a people who will produce its fruit". I wonder what that means. If we're the new tenants, we ought to find out.

### What is a fruitful Church like?

The words are common enough. We think we can recognise a fruitful organisation; it's one that does a lot of good things, and often it's large, and widely respected, and looks good. For a Church, we might look for a big, well-attended, handsome building serving a large congregation, with something going on at all times of the day and much of the night, with good talented officers, sensitive leadership, a wide spread of age-groups, and evidence of a lot of commitment. Or we might go to the USA, and investigate the television-churches, with their outreach and their interaction with the media, their capacity to enter the homes, the hearts, and the wallets of their adherents; a big bank-balance, it seems, is another sort of "success". Too crude? Well, yes; but not too crude to be believed by a surprising number of people.

### What have we forgotten?

It seems to me that we've left something very basic out of these ways of thought: the fact that Jesus himself was far from being *successful* in such terms. Some people accepted him for understandable human reasons: he cured people, he fed them, he apparently forgave their sins. Anyone who offers people hope will attract a following, and Jesus no doubt attracted many people who thought he was the answer to all their problems, but who later discovered they had mistaken him and "stopped going with him" (John 6:66). Even Peter and the other apostles "stopped going with him" one Thursday evening when they saw where he was heading. No-one wanted to accompany him to the Cross. Now, if a fruitful Church is the one that best helps people to be Christians, it will be the one that leads them by the shortest way to the carrying of the Cross. I'm not saying that rules out other sorts of

churchly success; but fine buildings, big crowds, famous ministers, spectacular liturgies, and a roaring social life mean *precisely nothing* if the Church that enjoys them is not made up of people who are carrying the Cross.

### Fruit that will endure

The fruit our vineyard-owner is looking for isn't to do with achievements measurable on human scales of success. His messengers all *fail*, and in the mission of his beloved Son, the Owner and the Son fail as well. The paradox is that *out of the failed missionary*, God makes the ultimate sign of his love for his vineyard. The wicked tenants think the owner's last word to them is: "Yield me your produce!"; and they assume that, disposing of the messenger, they will dispose of their obligations for ever, will own the land. In fact, the owner's last word to them is the death of his beloved Son at their hands; it is our understanding of this death that opens up the meaning of everything else. The fruitfulness of a church may, mysteriously, lie hidden from a worldly gaze, and reveal itself to relatively few.

### When we've done our worst

It's as if God invited us to go the whole hog with our inability to believe, our hatred of his path for us. When we've done our worst, he takes up an unassuming stone from our ruin, and himself begins to build. See what design he chooses for his work. I suspect that it will differ profoundly from the choices, not only of the secular world, but of many a "splendid" Church as well. *Fr Philip*