

5th Sunday of Easter (B)  
(Acts 9:26-31 / John 15:1-8)  
29.04.2018

In this morning's Gospel passage Jesus expresses the desire is that those who belong to Him be like fruitful branches of a grapevine. He makes it clear that the only way for us to bear the fruit He awaits from us is to remain closely united to Him. It is only when we live one with Christ, connected to Him, that we will draw forth from Him the life-sap, strength and energy we need to bear abundant fruit.

Attachment to Christ depends upon our commitment to prayer, for it is essentially through prayer that we express and give flesh to our communion with the Lord.

Given the emphasis Jesus places upon the role of His words in today's Gospel passage, it seems to me that attention is drawn to the importance of one particular form of prayer: what the monastic tradition calls *lectio divina* – the prayed reading of the Scriptures, meditative reflection upon the texts of the Bible.

In his very recent Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* Pope Francis stresses the importance of this prayer-form, explaining that it is not just one option among others, but a form of prayer which is absolutely essential. He cites the Bishops of India to make his point. I quote: *Devotion to the word of God is not simply one of many devotions, beautiful but somewhat optional. It goes to the very heart and identity of Christian life. The word has the power to transform lives.*

Clearly, Pope Francis sees *lectio divina* as a form of prayer which is vital for our on-going conversion.

In John 15 Jesus speaks of our growth being stimulated by means of His word. Is this not an invitation for us to constantly refer to Christ's words contained in the Gospels? Faithful contact with the inspired words of the Sacred Scriptures is likened here to the important operation of plant pruning. Pruning is carried out by a gardener for the well-being of the plant he tends to. Jesus speaks of our lives being *pruned by means of God's word*. Pruning is all about stimulating growth in view to enhancing fruitfulness.

It is implied here that our reading of God's word, if lived authentically, will be a pruning experience. Our turning to God's word will not only comfort and console us, but also challenge and correct us. Being led and guided by God's word is about more than simply finding safe refuge therein; it means that we are given a constant stimulus by our reading of the Sacred Scriptures. The words of the Bible – with their call to conversion – should constantly propel us forward in the way of life. Faithful reading of the inspired texts should lead us to experience on-going conversion.

In what we hear Him say in this morning's gospel, Jesus doesn't hide from us that the pruning we are led to undergo by means of His words will really cut into our lives at certain moments. If in one place (the Book of Psalms), the reading of God's word is likened to *savouring sweet honey*, elsewhere (the Epistle to the Hebrews) we are reminded that contact with the Bible is like contact with *a two-edged sword*. It is implied here that the words of the Sacred Scriptures will cut into our hearts at times. For this reason, contact with the Scriptures, can sometimes frighten us; we may even be tempted to shy away from it.

What Jesus' words will cut into most – in a bid to amputate it from us – is our unhealthy *ego*. The Lord will prune us by means of His words, just as a wise vine-dresser might operate on a vine plant – in order to relieve us of the ill-effects our unhealthy *ego* is having upon us.

The Lord's desire for us is always that true life may emerge within us and shine through us. Though painful, the pruning and purification of our unhealthy *ego*, is the only way for us to attain true Christian growth and maturity. As John the Baptist put it *we must decrease so that Christ may increase in us and His life grow all the more within us.*

Apart from those things that will have grafted themselves onto us or taken root within us – ways of thinking, attitudes, behaviour, thought-patterns... (all things that have to be dealt with by on-going pruning, cut off and set aside) – there will also be the need for constant weeding all around us in our lives. Good, healthy soil is vital for a vine to be able to flourish and bear sweet-savoured, fruit – and so we must clear the ground surrounding our lives.

Such weeding will sometimes require of us that we free ourselves from unhealthy, destructive relationships – people who have gathered around us who have a life-sapping hold upon our lives; people who risk choking God's own life and energy within us. I am sure we've all experienced the kind of thing I'm referring to: contact with people who are *toxic*, as one friend puts it... the destructive influence of certain people who eat into our lives in ways that are not good for us.

While it is important for us to be able to nourish other people's lives – for it is part of God's plan for us that we give ourselves for others – there are times when we come to realise that we are being gnawed at by certain persons who are ready to devour us. When we realise that this has become the case, then it is clearly God's will for us to extract ourselves from their negative impact upon our lives.

It is not God's will for us that we be plundered and pillaged, devastated and destroyed by anyone.

God wants to see us respect ourselves. At times this will mean that we must say to ourselves and, where needed, to those who are making excessive demands upon us: *enough is enough.* If we are to be true to the Lord of life, and His will for our well-being, then we simply cannot consent to losing ourselves for no good purpose or to no sane avail.

Discernment is needed in all that I have evoked in this morning's reflection: discernment lived with Jesus, of course. This explains the importance of our taking regular times in the Lord's presence, striving to look at our lives and all the situations in which we find ourselves – including and especially all our relationships. We must examine everything in the Lord's light, open to His guidance.

Pope Francis continually draws attention to the need for discernment in our Christian lives, emphasising it to be a vital need for anyone who wants to walk with Christ. Once again, let me allude to his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*. This Letter *Rejoice And Be Glad* ends with a section on the importance of discernment in all our lives. Pope Francis writes: *Discernment is necessary not only at extraordinary times, when we need to resolve grave problems and make crucial decisions... We need it at all times, to help us recognise God's timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of His grace and disregard His invitation to grow.*

This leads me to the final thought I want to share with you this morning: namely, that the vine image we are asked to consider today speaks to us of growth; the call to grow in the Lord.

It is the Lord's desire that we grow to *our full stature in Christ*. The Apostle Paul reminds us of this in his Letter to the Ephesians.

*To grow to our full stature in Christ* implies, above all else, growth in humility: growth in humble trust, growth in loving confidence in God.

If Jesus speaks of Himself as the vine, He speaks of His Father as the vine-dresser: the vine-dresser in whom He has full confidence and trust.

In the same way as the branches of the vine won't understand the gardener's actions, so it will happen for us that we won't always understand the Lord's ways in our lives.

At certain moments, we can be left wondering if the Lord is not going too far with us – cutting into our lives too brutally as He prunes them. Even then – especially then – the call addressed to us is a call to trust in the Lord God... not only nonetheless, but rather, all the more!

When we feel the pain of the Lord's pruning in our lives, it is important for us to believe that He is acting with our greatest good in mind and our genuine well-being at heart.

God sees the bigger picture that we ignore; He understands the wider implications of His actions for our lives. We have to admit that much of the time we are inclined to be so limited in our outlook and our vision is so narrow. Because of this, we can fear for our lives during the pruning process we are led to undergo. We can wonder if God knows what He is doing. We might ask ourselves if we will ever recuperate and find life again after some severe intervention which has really cut us back, when, in fact, by God's mysterious action, we are being fortified and strengthened by this severe pruning that we are undergoing – even though it doesn't feel just like that at the moment.

There are times in all our lives when we are cut to the marrow and brought to our knees through adversity and a suffering. At such times we can feel as if we are being led to nothing less than the brink of interior devastation. When we are brought to that point how important for us to be all the more prayerful and to cling to the Lord as never before... because there is simply no one else to whom we can turn. I find particularly consoling the following remark from a spiritual master of recent times – a remark born of experience: *Nothing inspires prayer like adversity, sorrow, humiliation. In the broken times we pray at our best. Our prayer rises in simplicity: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, I trust in you!* (cf. Brennan Manning *The Signature of Jesus*, p140). Quoting those lines, I am reminded of a 2<sup>nd</sup> century text in which an ancient spiritual guide – *The Shepherd of Hermas* – shares something of his experience with us: *God does not leave us until he has broken our hearts and our bones.*

If God teaches us by pruning our lives, He sometimes cuts us back to our very limits in a bid to strip and liberate us from what is often the greatest obstacle to our spiritual growth: self-sufficiency!

Again and again, the Bible shows us how God often teaches people best when they are at their lowest ebb. He taught Job as he sat on the dunghill. There Job was led to realise that God was His only hope. It happens that the Lord teaches us in the way He taught Job: by taking away all our props and supports, including people we cherish and care for, people we have truly loved and continue to love, even as they are lost to us. God's grace works in mysterious ways – sometimes leading us into spaces of dire poverty at the deepest level of our being, so that we may experience therein the infinite riches of His love!

In my experience it is when we are at our lowest ebb that God comes up trumps for us and shows Himself at His best.

I think it is especially important for us to remember that today's gospel passage on the vine follows on from Jesus' teaching heard at the Eucharist last Friday morning: the gospel passage which calls upon us to trust in Him: *Trust in God still and trust in Me.*

Whatever our experience in life right now – and especially if that experience is proving to be challenging and tough – let us dare to renew our confidence and trust in God in this Eucharist.

I often recall how an elderly Protestant neighbour taught me to sing as a little child, growing up in Belfast, the following words used as a Chorus Hymn in her church:

*Trust in the Lord and don't despair.*

*He is a friend so true.*

*No matter what your troubles are.*

*Jesus will see you through!*

*So sing when the day is bright.*

*Sing through the darkest night...*

*All the way, every day.*

*Let us sing, sing, sing!*

The words of that Evangelical Chorus echo the call with which we entered into the liturgy of this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. We heard in our opening Gregorian Chant this invitation: *Cantate Domino!* The call addressed to us through this Sunday's Introit is the call to *Sing to the Lord!* Let's do that always.

Let's sing to the Lord even through the darkest night.

Let's sing when our hearts are most fearful and we are sad and we just cannot see our way through alone.

Whether we realise it or not, the Lord is with us... He is always with us. He will see us through.

Amen!