

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B**

Acts 9:26-31

Psalm 21

1 John 3:18-24

John 15:1-8

Our Gospel passages for Easter are some of the most beautiful readings we hear all year. We have the strange, wonderful, powerful appearances of Risen Jesus to his disciples; we have the remarkably consoling image of the Good Shepherd. And today we are given another agricultural image: that of vines and branches.

Vineyards were a source of great pride and pleasure in Biblical times, as I suppose they still are. Unlike the wheat and barley fields and the herds of cattle and flocks of sheep that grace Jesus' other parables, a vineyard is something totally unnecessary for human survival. Vineyards did not provide people with daily bread, but a glass of wine — something to cheer the heart, as Scripture says: a bit of enjoyment; a moment of prosperity and plenty. Moreover, vineyards were a sign of being committed to a particular land and place. They take time to plant and years to develop. It's hard work to press the grapes and ferment the wine. It is a major investment.

All of that is wrapped up in this image of vines and branches. The Church is something that Jesus is very much invested in. You and I are people that Jesus very much cares about. He desires a union with us that is intimate and total. He desires for us, not just the bare minimum to sustain our earthly and spiritual lives, but a truly overabundant joy. We may imagine Jesus as a king, and we as his subjects, which is indeed an image that he presents us with. We might also picture ourselves as sheep in his pasture, we heard from him last week. But in the image we are given today, Christ and us are one and the same – as inseparable as a vine from its own branches. We are of course familiar with this imagery, but it should never cease to amaze us. We are not just subjects of Christ's Kingdom, or members of his club. He is the vine and we are the branches. He is the head, and we are his Body.

To be connected to God through the life of grace is an incredibly powerful thing. We can produce good fruit in our souls and in the world because we are united to the Son of God, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. We can bud and grow because we remain in Jesus as part of the vine. This union, of course, is mystical rather than physical, but through the sacraments we actually do participate in God's life in ways we can feel and touch and, on some level, understand. By baptism we were joined to the vine; by Holy Communion we water its roots; by Reconciliation we are grafted back onto it after we separate ourselves from it by sin.

And yet, here is a great mystery – even being fruitful and virtuous does not spare us pain. Note this carefully about Jesus' parable: whether the vine is productive or barren, either way it must be pruned! Vines need to be pruned, like many plants do. Plants can look quite unsightly after being pruned – but, if done properly, before long they shoot out new branches and become healthier than ever.

God does the same for us. Pruning well produces plentiful fruit – but this doesn't change the fact that being pruned is not pleasant. Assorted setbacks, emotional and physical suffering, best laid plans being wiped away – such as getting Covid the day of a concert perhaps! United mystically to Jesus—the true vine—we are assured that this pruning will allow us to become more fruitful, even if we don't understand how. As Pope Benedict XVI often said to young people, you weren't made for comfort – you were made for greatness, and this requires pruning. And of course, Jesus himself endured this pruning upon the cross, before resuming an even greater glory in the Resurrection. He doesn't ask us to do anything that he himself did not do.

It's also worth noting, by way of context, that Jesus shared this parable with his Apostles during the Last Supper. We are united with Christ in many different ways—through prayer, through reading Sacred Scripture, through acts of love to others—but most of all we are united to him in the Eucharist. Holy Communion is not merely a sign of being branches of the true vine; it is not just a symbol of our union with Christ – it truly makes this union so. The Eucharist is our very lifeblood! Just as sap flows from the roots to the branches, Jesus feeds us and nurtures us with his own life in this most perfect sacrament.

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The Good News of Christ's victory over death, and the supreme blessing of the Eucharist, have been given to us as a pure gift. And we have received these gifts from the Lord, of course, but we have also received them from those who have gone before us in faith, and upon whose shoulders we stand. Countless generations of faithful have toiled before us so that you and I might know the risen Lord, and be able to gather to worship him and to be nourished by his sacraments.

And we have a responsibility to pay it forward—to be good stewards of what has been passed onto us—both by witnessing to those around us who don't yet have the blessing of knowing the freedom offered by Christ, and also to strive to pass this faith onto the generations who will come after us. We are called to do this first and foremost through the witness of Christian love in our lives. But there is also a need for us to offer concrete support for the material needs of our local Church.

Every Christmas we celebrate how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and, ever since, the Lord's Church has dwelt among the flesh and bone of our day-to-day world. We are part of the Lord's Body here and now, in our homes and in this parish. And just as a human body has day-to-day needs of food, shelter, clothing, etc, so our parish has day-to-day needs of providing for our liturgies, maintaining buildings, paying wages and bills, and financially supporting our efforts at proclaiming the Gospel.

The Body needs physical, as well as spiritual, care. And so the Church invites us to reflect from time-to-time on how we might be called to assist our parish in her mission at this stage in our lives – certainly with our prayer, with our witness and service, if

possible with our time volunteering in some capacity, and as appropriate with our finances as well.

This is not my parish, or even the Archbishop's parish – it is the Lord's parish, and we are each invited to take responsibility for ensuring that it can be a place where the Good News of the Lord's mercy is proclaimed to all, and where all are invited to share in the new life that burst forth from the empty tomb.