

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, B
REDEMPTIVE RELATIONSHIP

"I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser ... I am the vine; you are the branches." (Jn. 15: 1, 5)

On this Fifth Sunday of Easter, Jesus presents us with another image of Himself as "The True Vine" after we reflected on His self-sacrificing image of the "Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep" (Jn. 10: 11) last week. It was an image that described how we, the sheep, ought to relate with the Shepherd by knowing, listening, and following. Similarly, the metaphor of the vine and the branches has to do with our relationship with Him. It explains a relationship that is much deeper; a reality that is intrinsic; a dependency that cannot be substituted. By employing this image of the vine to describe Himself, Jesus takes us back to the Old Testament, where several times Israel was described as the vineyard of the Lord (Ps. 80: 8-16; Is. 51: 1-7; 27: 2-6; Jer. 2: 21). But that is not all, by identifying Himself as "The True Vine", Jesus is presenting Himself as the new and faithful vine that produces the expected fruits through obedience to the Father, as against the old and unfaithful vine represented by Israel's disobedience. We, the New Israel, are expected to live in imitation of the True Vine and not follow the examples of the unfaithful old Israel. Barnabas, Son of Encouragement; Paul, the Witness: In the First Reading (Acts 9: 26-31), the apostle Paul goes to Jerusalem to meet the other disciples after his encounter with the Lord on his way to Damascus and his subsequent conversion. The disciples had heard of him as the chief witness to the killing of Stephen (Acts 7: 54-8: 1) and how he was determined to destroy the followers of "The Way." Hence, "they were all afraid of him." Sometimes in life, we quickly judge people based on stories we have heard. The disciples heard about Saul, but they did not know Paul, they knew about his persecution, but they never heard of his conversion, they saw the murderer of one of them standing in their midst, but they never knew he had also become a witness. Thanks to Barnabas, who lived out his name as "Son of consolation, Son of exhortation, son of comfort and son of encouragement, and took charge of the situation, dispelling fear by telling them of the conversion story of Saul, now Paul. This made Paul welcomed and accepted as one of them. Paul's life became a life of fruit-bearing witness and conversion among the gentiles. Can stand up and defend or speak on behalf of somebody despised and rejected by others? Can we take the place of Barnabas in the lives of people around us especially at this time, when fear and uncertainty have engulfed our world leaving many groping in the darkness of doubts and depression? Our world today needs many Barnabas(es).

"I am the vine you are the branches": Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches to present the fundamental intrinsic relationship we need to have with Him. This is a very encouraging and challenging picture. It is encouraging because it offers a dependable assurance that we are inseparably united with our Risen Lord. The vine is the source of life for the branches; it nourishes and sustains the branches. Here, we draw life from Jesus, Who came so that we may have life, life in its fullness (Jn. 10: 10). Authentic

life can only come through an intimate relationship with Jesus. In the words of Archbishop Robert Barron of Archdiocese of Los Angeles, a renowned evangelist of Word on Fire ministry: "Jesus is a force in which we participate; the body which we are cells and molecules, a river in which we swim." The challenge here is that of maintaining that relationship with Jesus so that we are constantly alive in Him. The Word of God, the Eucharist, and maintaining good prayer life can guarantee this relationship. But not without love, for love is the physical expression of the feelings of love. This love, St. John insists in the Second Reading (1 Jn. 3: 18-24), must be more than mere words: "My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active ..." Without active expression, love becomes inert, passive, and unproductive like a branch separated from the vine.

"Without me, you can do nothing": This image of the vine and the branches invites us to a life of absolute dependence. It implies that we cannot be truly productive if we sever that relationship with Him; that we cannot live any meaningful life here on earth if we are separated, cut-off from Him, and that we cannot have eternal life if we are not intimately united with Him while here in this world. Man cannot just afford to be independent of God and His Son. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in Me ... for cut off from Me you can do nothing (John 15: 5).

The Pruning: It is important to note that even the branch that abides with the vine and bears fruits is pruned "to bear much fruits." The pruning of the vines, which is done during the winter dormancy (December/January), helps to ensure that the fruits are of good quality. Relating this to our lived experience, the pruning can be understood as corrections, sufferings, tests, and different vicissitudes of life that we have to go through as Christians. Certainly, our union with Christ does not exclude us from this pruning. The Letter to the Hebrews (12: 4-11) reminds us that God corrects the child He loves ... You must endure your trials as discipline ... For what son is not corrected by his father? ... Indeed, no correction is pleasant at the time, but painful, yet later it brings to those who have been trained by it the peaceful reward of an upright life. Similarly, the apostle Peter exhorts us: My dear friends do not be surprised that you are being tested by fire. It is not an unusual occurrence. Instead, you should be glad to share in the sufferings of Christ ... (1 Peter 4: 12-13). These corrections and tests are intended to bring out the best in us as the pruning of the vine bring out much and best fruits; to toughen us in spirit and make us mature in faith. There is a need for us to apply the pruning process to our lives as well.

My dear friends, we are privileged to be linked to the Risen Lord in such mysterious intimacy, let us make the best of it by not trying to depend on ourselves but in Him, Who has offered Himself for us. Let us love one another beyond mere words. There is always something we can do to show some genuine love. It does not have to be great, sometimes, all we need is to do a little with greater love. Let us pause and ask ourselves a couple of questions:

What habits do we need to prune off so we can grow and bear more good fruits?
What do we need to detach from so we can be attached to the vine?
What do we need to die to so that we can resurrect in the newness of life?

Lord, may your grace sustain us in Your love, so that nothing may separate us from Your love.