

Homily: Fifth Sunday of Easter 2021

Back in the days when we used to be allowed to go overseas, I went with a friend of mine to France. While we were there we visited various places in the Loire Valley, an area full of vineyards, many of them vast estates. Some of these have been lovingly cared for by the same families for many generations, and in many cases the vines themselves outlive those who tend them. Perhaps that's one reason why the vine is used many times in Scripture as an image to help us appreciate the relationship between God and His people. It's not a short-lived plant – it remains.

Jesus today tells us, "I am the true vine." In the Old Testament, the people of Israel often understood that they were like a vine planted and tended by God. Isaiah famously speaks of Israel as the Lord's vineyard, but laments the fact that so often they only yielded sour grapes instead of the harvest of love He desired. But Jesus says, "I am the true vine". In the past, the people were the vine, but now God Himself has entered into the world and become the very stem of this plant. He is no longer outside, looking on: He has joined Himself to humanity. Because God has come to earth in Jesus, the Lord Himself is now the vine, and we are the branches. Jesus has planted Himself in the earth, He has come here to remain with us; He has made His home here. And because He Himself is the vine, it means that the vine can never be rejected by God – because we are united to the Son of God, we are always loved by the Father.

The vine can never be rejected, but – the Lord says today – it must be pruned. Cutting back some of the branches enables it to yield better fruit. It's not difficult to see the truth of this in our own lives. Sometimes we forget we are part of the vine, totally dependent on Christ for our life and for all that is good in us. Then pride creeps in, and with it come all the things that prevent us from really loving. So we need to be pruned – cut down to size – to recognise again our need of God. As the image of pruning suggests, this may be painful. But it's this humility which makes it possible for us to love. A proud person is always going to put themselves first. But when we are humble, when we know our need of God, then we see the needs of others too and are able to give ourselves in loving service. And so we bear more fruit for the Lord – the fruits of love. Jesus says today that we are pruned by His Word, so we must allow that Word to challenge us, to question us, to cut us down to size. In this way we truly grow.

There is something else which allows us to bear fruit: to remain in the Lord. "Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty", the Lord says, "for cut off from me you can do nothing." We all want to "bear fruit"; we all have a desire to be useful, productive, helpful to others. But first, we must remain in the Lord, stay close to Him in love, so that we can receive all the grace we need to live in this way. The Lord does not say that those who try harder or those who are more talented bear the fruit He desires, but only those who remain in Him. And whoever remains in Him, whatever their state in life, whatever they or anyone else thinks of their usefulness, bears fruit in plenty. That is the Lord's promise. Being humble, being pruned by God, reminds us of our need of Him, and so we learn that we must remain in Him. And therefore we bear more fruit.

Our Lord speaks these words in the context of the Last Supper. Shortly beforehand, He had taken wine, the fruit of the vine, and given it to His disciples as His own Blood. It can hardly be an accident that He then uses this powerful image of the vine – an image of unity with Him, an image which reminds us that it is His life which flows through us. So this image encourages us to appreciate more deeply the gift of the Eucharist in which Jesus gives His own Body and Blood, a gift given so that His life, divine life, may be ours. And it reminds us that by participating in the Eucharist we are called to bear fruit in the world.

Many times in the Gospel today the Lord speaks of remaining: “You must remain part of the vine... whoever remains in me bears fruit in plenty... if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask what you will, and you will get it.” The Lord wants us to love Him, and indeed next Sunday we’ll hear Him say precisely, “Remain in my love.” He knows that initial enthusiasm is often easy, but remaining when enthusiasm wanes is a choice we have to make in faith. By planting Himself on earth as the true vine, by grafting us on to Himself, Jesus has made a clear promise: “I will remain with you.” Now He invites us to remain with Him, in Him, so that we may receive His life, know our need of Him, and bear the plentiful fruit of love.

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