

EASTER V (May 3): ACTS 9: 26-31; 1JOHN 3:18-24; JN 15: 1-8

Anecdotes: #1: Hampton Court vine: Donald Grey Barnhouse tells about a grapevine in Hampton Court near London that is about 1,000 years old. See more at: <http://www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace/stories/palacehighlights/TheGreatVine#sthash.Vfmdv4c1.dpuf>. It has but one root which is at least two feet thick. Some of the branches are 200 feet long. Because of skillful cutting and pruning, the vine produces several tons of grapes each year. Even though some of the smaller branches are 200 feet from the main stem, they bear much fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them (*Sermons Illustrated*). If we, the branches, are not bearing much fruit, it may be that we are not feeding as we ought upon the life-giving flow from the vine. The great truth that Jesus is trying to tell us is that if we want life in all its fullness, then we must be connected to the "true vine," the very source of life. "Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus said. We draw our life from him.

2: "**Jesus nut**" The "Jesus nut," also called the "Jesus pin," is the nut that holds the main rotor to the mast of some helicopters, such as the UH-1 Iroquois helicopter. The long and strong metallic fans of the helicopter are fitted to the main rotor of the mast. The "Jesus nut" is a slang term first coined by American soldiers in Vietnam; the technical term is MRRN or *main rotor retaining nut*. The origin of the term comes from the idea that, if the "Jesus nut" were to fail in flight, the helicopter would detach from the rotors and the only thing left for the crew to do would be to pray to Jesus before the helicopter crashed. Today's Gospel explains why Jesus must be the pivotal point in our lives, through the little parable of the vine and the branches.

3: Stay connected to Christ the servant: Some years ago, Mother Teresa was asked by a reporter one day, "What is your biggest problem?" Without a moment of hesitation, Mother Teresa answered with one word: "Professionalism." She said: "Here are these servants of Jesus who care for the poorest of the poor. I have one who just went off and came back with her medical degree. Others have come back with registered nurse degrees. Another with a master's in social work... and when they came back with their degrees... their first question always is, 'Where is my office?' Then she said, 'But you know what I do? I send them over to the House of the Dying where they simply hold the hands of dying people for six months and after that, they're ready to be servants again.'" [Victor D. Pentz, "Take This Job and Love It" *Protestant Hour Sermon*, (3/14/2005), p.3.] This was the greatness of Mother Teresa... her unflinching commitment to stay connected to Christ's Servant Mentality.

Introduction: Today's Scripture selections emphasize the need for Christians to abide in Christ as a condition for producing fruits of kindness, mercy, charity and holiness. The first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, testifies to the abundance of spiritual fruits yielded by the apostles because of their close bond with the risen Lord. The reading tells us how the Lord pruned the former Pharisee, Saul of

Tarsus, the fanatic who had persecuted the Church, to produce a fruit-bearing branch called Paul, the zealous Apostle to the Gentiles, entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Even Paul's forced return to Tarsus for a brief period is an example of God's pruning of the vine to bring forth a greater harvest, namely, the mission to the Gentiles. Intoday's second reading, John, in his first letter to the Church, explains that only if we remain united to Christ by putting our faith in him and drawing our spiritual strength from him, will we be able to obey God's commandments, especially the commandment of love. In the Gospel, taken from the Last Supper discourse, Jesus uses his favorite image of the vine and branches to help his disciples understand the closeness of their relationship with him and the necessity of their maintaining it. They are not simply rabbi and disciples. Their lives are mutually dependent - as close as a vine and its branches. In fact, in using this image, Jesus is explaining to them and to us what our relationship with him should be like.

First reading, Acts 9:26-31: Today's first reading, taken from Acts, concentrates on one apostle in particular, namely Paul, who was pruned like a vine to be an apostle "by the will of God" (1 Cor 1:1). The story of Paul's conversion and call to become the Apostle to the Gentiles is narrated three times in Acts, in Chapters 9, 22 and 26. Today's reading, taken from Acts 9, describes the aftermath of his transformation from enemy of the early Christian movement to a God-chosen instrument bringing the Gospel to non-Jews. Jesus himself pruned away the former Saul, the Saul who had persecuted the Church, to make Paul, a man whose life was entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. But when Paul came to Jerusalem after preaching in Damascus for "a long time," the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of him. Finally they recognized the transforming power of the Spirit of God operating in Paul and gave their full support to him. Because Paul had become a vigorous witness for Christ, the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews), tried to kill him. When Paul's life was threatened, the other apostles helped him to leave Jerusalem and return to Tarsus. But even this setback in Paul's missionary work turned out to be just one more example of God's pruning of Paul - the vine-branch - to bring forth a greater harvest: the mission to the Gentiles.

Second Reading, 1 John 3:18-24: *The New American Bible* states that some members of John's early Christian community were advocating false doctrines, by refusing to accept the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus, by disregarding the commandment of love of neighbor, by refusing to accept Faith in Christ as the source of sanctification and by denying the redemptive value of Jesus' death. Hence, John says in the opening sentence in today's reading, "*Little children, let us love in deed and in truth and not merely talk about it.*" John is criticizing pious Christians who are comfortable with their petty hatreds and uncaring indifference, as though such attitudes were acceptable behavior for those saved by Christ. The next sentence, "*His commandment is this: We are to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and are to love one another as He commanded us,*" summarizes best the essence of Christianity and disapproves extreme ideological positions like those threatening the Church today, namely, (1) dogmatic *conservatism*, which makes creedal

orthodoxy the only criterion, (2) *fideism* in which all that matters is "accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior," and (3) *liberalism*, which reduces Christianity to living peacefully with others. The concluding advice, "*keep (God's) commandments*," invites us to a transformed life, flowing from a mutual, intimate relationship between God and each of us individual believers -- our union in His love. It follows that we must love each other with the same selfless, sacrificial, forgiving love with which Jesus Christ loved us; indeed, that is His command to us. John also teaches us that personal assurance of salvation doesn't depend on intense religious experience (being "born again"), or dramatic charismatic expressions among believers (like speaking in tongues, healing, or handling poisonous snakes). Rather, we are saved because we are members of Christ - of His Church, the community gifted with God's "Spirit," in which the Spirit's presence is corroborated by the members' genuine, loving concern for each other.

Exegesis: The context: Today's Gospel text is part of Jesus' farewell discourse during his Last Supper with his disciples, as found in John 13-17. Jesus explains to his apostles how they and their disciples can carry on when he is no longer bodily or physically present. Jesus assures them, using the parable of the vine and branches, that the life-giving Spirit Whom Jesus will send them, will be present and active within and among his disciples and their successors.

Israel as God's vine and vineyard: There are numerous Old Testament passages which refer to Israel as a vine: Ps 80:8-16, Is 5:1-7, Jer 2:21, Ez 15:1-8, 17:5-10, 19:10-14, and Hos 10:1. "*The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel*," sings the prophet Isaiah in his song of the Vineyard (Is 5:1-7). "*Yet I planted you a choice vine*" is God's message to Israel through Jeremiah (Jer 2:21). "*Israel is a luxuriant vine*," says Hosea (Hos 10:1). The vine is part and parcel of Jewish imagery and the very symbol of Israel, serving as an emblem on the coins of the Maccabees. One of the glories of the Temple was the great golden vine upon the front of the Holy Place. But the symbol of the vine is never used in the Old Testament apart from the idea of degeneration and infidelity deserving of Yahweh's severe punishment. That is why Ezekiel says that it should be burned in the fire (Ez 15).

Jesus claims that he is the true vine: Since Israel has become a degenerate vine producing wild and bitter grapes, Jesus makes the unique claim that he is the true and ideal vine and his disciples are the living and fruit-producing branches. He clarifies his statement, explaining that his Heavenly Father is the Vine-grower (v. 1), he (Christ) is the vine (v. 5), his disciples are branches (v. 5) and those who do not abide in him are useless branches, suitable only to be cut away and thrown into the fire (v. 6). Jesus is the true vine, because the old vine, the original chosen people, was succeeded by the new vine, the Church, whose head is Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:9). To be fruitful, one must be joined to the new, true vine, Christ. It is living the life of Christ, the life of grace, which gives the believer the nourishment which enables him or her to yield the fruits of eternal life. This image of the vine also helps us to understand the unity of the Church. St. Paul explains that we are Christ's mystical body in which all the members are intimately

united with the head and united to one another (1 Cor 12:12-26; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4: 15-16).

Pruning an essential part of growing fruit-producing branches: In the vineyards in Palestine, pruning was done in late fall or early winter because pruning in spring or summer caused excessive bleeding that weakened the vine. Dead branches were cut away to save the vine. Other branches were pruned so that they would bear more grapes than leaves in the next growing season. John describes God as the Vine-grower who has planted a vine, Jesus. The Father removes every branch that bears no fruit and prunes the other branches so they may bear more fruit. Jesus tells his apostles that they have already been pruned by the words he has spoken to them. He refers to the announcement that he will soon be leaving them by his death on the cross. The apostles will not feel the full impact of this "pruning" until Jesus is actually taken away from them in death. Eventually, they will be pruned of all attachment to the things of this world so that they may be ready to attach themselves to the things of Heaven. It is a sorry sight to see that some of us just come to Church Sunday after Sunday in search of spiritual "handouts" or just to "*fulfill our Sunday obligation,*" but give little or nothing back to the community. They are like fruitless, leafy branches draining life from the trunk without giving anything in return.

Abiding in Jesus as condition for fertility: Even a well-pruned branch cannot bear grapes unless it abides in the vine, drawing water and minerals from the main trunk and transporting food prepared in the leaves to the main trunk and to the roots. Jesus reminds us that we can not bear fruit either, unless we abide in him just as he abides in us. Jesus says, "*I am the vine, you are the branches.*" What Jesus means is that by abiding in him we will bear much fruit, and that apart from him we can do nothing. Abiding in Christ means that God has to be inside us and we have to be inside God. We abide in Christ by drawing near to God and by experiencing His being near to us, or by living every moment as he has commanded us to do, with the radiant presence of Christ all around us. This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is maintained by the spiritual helps common to all the faithful, chiefly by active participation in the Liturgy. Those of us who do not abide in Jesus will wither and be thrown away, just as withered branches are thrown into the fire to be burned. Fruit-bearing in Christian life is not just of our own making. It is the sign that Christ is working in us and through us.

Life messages: 1) We need pruning in our Christian life. Cutting out of our lives everything that is contrary to the spirit of Jesus and renewing our commitment to Christian ideals in our lives every day is the first type of self-imposed pruning expected of us. A second means of pruning is practicing self-control over our evil inclinations, sinful addictions and aberrations. Cordial mingling with people of different cultures, races, religions and orientations in our neighborhood and society enables us to prune away our selfish and prejudicial tendencies and to treat others in our society with Christian charity and openness. Jesus prunes, purifies and strengthens us by allowing us to face pain and suffering, contradictions and difficulties with courage of our Christian convictions.

2) Let us abide in Christ and let Christ abide in us: The four Gospels teach us how to become true disciples of Jesus and how to abide in him as braches abide in the main trunk of the vine and draw their life from the vine. Personal and liturgical prayers, frequenting of the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation, daily and meditative reading of the Bible and selfless, loving acts of kindness and mercy and forgiveness enable us to abide in Jesus, the true vine, as fruit-bearing branches.

Prepared by Fr. Antony Kadavil (akadavil@gmail.com) and published in the CBCI Website.