

Homily for 5th Sunday of Easter, Year B (2nd May 2021)

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Acts 9:26-31; Ps 21(22); 1 Jn 3:18-24; Jn 15:1-8

Theme: Separated from Jesus, the true vine, we can do nothing!

Last Sunday, we reflected on Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Today, the gospel gives us another imagery, that of the vine and vineyard. The imagery of the vine and vineyard was not alien to the people of Israel, who had and still have an abundance of fruitful vines. The Old Testament uses this imagery to describe the relationship between God and his people. The song of the unfruitful vineyard in the book of Isaiah describes God's love for Israel. After painstakingly preparing and planting the vineyard, the people produced wild grapes (Isa 5:1-7). God had chosen Israel as his vineyard out of his love for them (cf. Deut 7:7-11). As a vinedresser, God did everything to care for his vineyard. Yet, by his might, He brought this same vine out of Egypt when they were oppressed and drove out the nations to plant them in the Promised Land (Ps 80:8-9). He planted them as a choice vine, wholly of faithful and reliable seed, but they turned degenerate and became wild or alien vine to God (cf. Jer 2:21).

Jesus applies the imagery of the vineyard in the gospel with a twist. The vineyard is no longer the people of Israel as we find in the Old Testament, but the kingdom of God, in other words, the New Israel. While the Old Israel became alien to God, Jesus represents the New Israel. He is the true vine, reliable and faithful to his Father, the vinedresser. Israel bore wild grapes because they separated themselves from God, the vinedresser. The New Israel will produce good fruit. But, unlike the Old Israel, those who belong to the New Israel must cling to Jesus, the true vine. They must allow themselves to be pruned by the Father, to make them into what he desires his vineyard to be. The branch which is part of the tree is alive and bears fruit. The branches separated from the tree can do nothing. They wither and are thrown into the fire.

Saul once operated along the lines of the Old Israel, persecuting and killing the Christians. At that point, unknown to him, he was separated from the true vine, but after his conversion and encounter with Jesus, he became part of the true vine. In our first reading, Saul went to Jerusalem after his conversion. He tried to join the other disciples, but they would not accept him. They were still afraid of him as a destroyer of the faith. They did not see him as part of the true vine. But after Barnabas introduced him to the disciples and told them about his conversion, they accepted him, and Saul immediately joined them in preaching and defending the faith. Now grafted unto Jesus, the true vine, he preached fearlessly and argued with the Hellenists. Thus, Saul fulfils the words of the Psalmist, 'my soul shall live for him...[and] tell of the Lord to generations yet to come, declare his faithfulness...the things the Lord has done.' Saul teaches us that when we are joined to Jesus, we must renounce our past and cling to the true vine, unafraid to preach the gospel and even die for it.

Those grafted unto Jesus the true vine are known by their way of life, not just by mere talk but also through genuine love, rooted in Jesus. St. John tells us in the second reading what God demands of us as part of the true vine. First, we must keep his commandments. 'His commandments are these: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we love one another.' Keeping God's commandments is an expression of love and a confirmation that we walk and live in the truth. We cannot love or proclaim Jesus in truth, except we are firmly attached to him as part of the vine. Our being part of the vine is what makes us bear fruits in the world.