

6 Easter B SML 2018
JN 15:9-17

This evening's (morning's) gospel to "REMAIN" concludes Our Blessed Lord's teaching on the vine and the branches, rooted in the Old Testament, Isaiah Chapter 5, to be exact, in a story about a vineyard, that started out all well and good, but quickly turned bad:

My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside; he spaded it, cleared it of stones and planted the choicest vines; within it he built a watchtower, and hewed out a wine press. Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes. Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard: what more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? Now, I will let you know what I mean to do to my vineyard: take away its hedge, break through its walls, let it be trampled! Yes, I will make it a ruin!"

Isaiah probably told the story in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating Israel's journey through the desert, in the context of the cheerful atmosphere characteristic of this eight day feast. Imagine many different sorts of performances going on at the feast, and the Prophet Isaiah himself mingling with the celebrating people and announcing a love story about his friend and his vineyard.

But then it suddenly became very clear to Isaiah's listeners that the vineyard was Israel – the story was about the very people who were present at the Feast. God gave them the way of justice in the Torah, He loved them, he did everything for them, and they have answered Him with unjust action and a regime of injustice. What seemed like a love story was actually a story of judgment. It ended on a gloomy note – that of Israel's abandonment of God, with no sign at this stage in Israel's history of any further promise.

Despite everything that happened to Israel since that Feast of Tabernacles when Isaiah told the story in the midst of the people, Israel found itself again in essentially the same situation at the time when Our Blessed Lord lived, Who spoke to the heart of His people.

Recall the Parable of the Wicket Tenants, where Jesus did not use a vine as the image of Israel, but rather the image of wicked tenants of a vineyard whose owner had gone on a journey. The history of God's constant struggle for and with Israel was depicted in a series of servants who came at the owner's order to collect the grapes. The history of the prophets, their suffering and death appear throughout the parable, where

the servants were manhandled and killed. Eventually, the land owner sent his son, whom the tenants also seized and killed.

Once again, history suddenly entered the present. As Isaiah's listeners realized he was talking about them in his story about a vineyard, so Jesus' listeners realized the parable was about them and Him in the parable of the tenants of a vineyard. Jesus said in so many words, "I'm talking to you about Me!"

Yet, if we open our eyes, isn't what was said in the parable actually a description of our present world? This is precisely the logic of today, that there is absolutely no need for God. I read that 46% of respondents told a 2011 survey¹ that they never wonder whether they will go to heaven. The new group is not atheists, who believe there is no God, not agnostics, who believe you cannot prove or disprove there is a God, but apatheists, who believe there is a God, but who cares? This way, we no longer belong to God, we can do as we please. We get rid of God and there is no measuring rod above us; we are our own measure and the "vineyard" belongs to us.

Jesus says no. The vineyard, the vine is not Israel. I am the true vine. And the words "I AM," that is God, and "true" are

¹ by Nashville-based evangelical research agency, LifeWay Research

the important things to notice about this saying, in that I am the vine and the vineyard belongs to Him!

What is also important is the theme of purification. Every branch that does not bear fruit will be pruned so that it bears more fruit. The vine is cut back. The vine becomes smaller so that it can grow again.

Each October, every parish conducts what is called “the October count,” which is basically taking a head count for two consecutive weeks. In the Diocese of Trenton, 17 to 18 percent of registered parishioners attend Mass. A very concerning statistic says Bishop O’Connell, to which I whole heartedly agree. I’m pleased to add that at St. Mary of the Lakes, 25 percent of registered parishioners attend Mass, and our attendance has increased every year for the last three years. So while the larger Church or diocesan church may be trending down, St. Mary of the Lakes is trending up! That’s very good news. But our work of evangelization is far from over. 25 percent attending Mass means 75 percent of parishioners are not attending Mass regularly. All of us need to do all that we can so attendance will continue trending up.

Applying today’s gospel to this statistic, some might say that those who are lapsed Catholics are perhaps those who do

not produce fruit. I don't necessarily agree with that. Some who are lapsed might not produce fruit, but not all of them. 292 lapsed Catholics responded to a survey asking them why they have lapsed, and the reasons varied from Church teaching, to the sex scandal, to a bad experience with a priest or a member of the parish staff, to poor liturgies, poor music, poor homilies. Whatever the reason, the Church as a branch on the vine is being pruned.

So where does that leave us? Where does that leave me? It leaves me with a challenge to do my best to teach so that the people understand what the Church teaches and why, to offer the Mass with reverence, to do my best to write a good homily; to do my best to lead this parish.

Where does that leave you? It leaves you to remain, and to evangelize, a fancy word for "talking up" Jesus, talking up St. Mary of the Lakes, either over the back fence, or on social media. Like us on Facebook. Follow us on Twitter and repost everything! That's the new evangelization spoken of in the church since the pontificate of Pope Benedict.

If you read last Sunday's gospel and today's gospel, there is one word that repeats 11 times, and that word is "REMAIN:"
Last Sunday:

- ✓ REMAIN in me as I REMAIN in you
- ✓ Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own . . . so neither can you unless you REMAIN in me
- ✓ Whoever REMAINS in me and I in him will bear much fruit
- ✓ Anyone who does not REMAIN in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither
- ✓ If you REMAIN in me and my words REMAIN in you . . .

This Sunday:

- ✓ REMAIN in my love
- ✓ You will REMAIN in my love
- ✓ Just as I have kept my Father's commandments and REMAIN in his love
- ✓ It was I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will REMAIN

REMAIN. The Church is not perfect. The Church is not perfect because I am not perfect, you are not perfect, and those who have left are not perfect. The Church will never be perfect. The Church never was perfect. Read a good fat history book, and there be reminded that wave after wave of imperfection (on the inside and out) has rolled against the Church:

- ✓ Christians being devoured by lions in Roman amphitheatres

- ✓ Persecutions under the merciless, like Diocletian who prided himself with the inscription, “To Diocletian who destroyed the very name Christian!”
- ✓ Heresies that confused our teaching but later helped to define it
- ✓ Barbarians who invaded but eventually put down their spears and knelt to be baptized
- ✓ The cruel excesses of the Spanish Inquisition
- ✓ The Protestant Reformation
- ✓ The French Revolution
- ✓ The antipopes
- ✓ The Oath Against Modernism
- ✓ The sex scandal that rocked the American Church

Yet each time the waves of heresies, persecutions, wars, reformations and scandals subsided, and those who remained (and there is the key – and those who remained) got up and looked around, there was always the Catholic Church. Why, because “I AM the true vine and those who REMAIN bear much fruit and become my disciples.”