

Homily Notes for 5th Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018

Readings: Acts 9:26-31; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

1. Summary: Becoming fruitful, intentional disciples. If last Sunday was the Sunday of the Good Shepherd, this 5th Sunday after Easter could be known as the Sunday of the Fruitful (intentional) Disciple. As followers of the Risen Christ, we are called to live out our faith in word and deed, demonstrating our love of God by our obedience to His commandments and loving one another. This conversion promises blessings in this life and salvation in the next. It is also the answer to the crises in our society today.

2. Commentary on the readings: The first reading: All of Chapter 9 of Acts tells of the conversion of St Paul. It tells us how the Lord pruned the former Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, a 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. We note that, as a convert, his preaching was so powerful that it provoked the Jews and the Hellenists to seek to kill him, first in Damascus and then in Jerusalem. This did validate his conversion. It is my hope that in our Parish some of us are undergoing such a powerful conversion to God.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? He said, "Who are you, sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Note that Saul was persecuting the Church. Jesus is now in heaven. Hence we understand the Church as the body of Christ. To treat the Church badly is to mistreat Jesus.

3. Guidance of our hearts by God's commands. In today's second reading, John, in his first letter to the Church, explains that we can have assurance of our salvation when we keep His commandments.

"Those who keep his commandments remain in him and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us." ...[3:24]).

Our hearts need to be formed by knowledge of the commandments. 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.

4. In the Gospel, taken from the Last Supper discourse, Jesus uses his favorite image of the vine and branches. This is one of the fundamental images of the New Testament. Let us remember that it is in chapter 15 of the Gospel of St. John. Jesus uses this image to help his disciples understand the closeness of their relationship with him and the necessity of 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.

Jesus is working with ideas and images that were part of the religious heritage of the Jewish nation. Repeatedly in the O.T., Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God. "The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel" (Isa 5;1-7). See also Jer 2:21, Ezekiel 15, Eze 19:10, Hosea 10:1, Ps 80:8. The vine had actually become the symbol of the nation of Israel. It was the 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. Many a great man had counted it an honor to give gold to mold a new bunch of grapes or even a new grape on to that vine. The vine was part and parcel of Jewish imagery, and the very symbol of Israel.

5. Jesus calls himself the *true* vine. It is a curious fact that the symbol of the vine is never used in the Old Testament apart from the idea of degeneration. The point of Isaiah's picture is that the vineyard has run wild. The situation in the time of Jesus is like today. "Girls gone wild." "Politicians gone mad." "Debt and the internet out of control." Rather, let us get back to Jesus who is "the way, the truth and the life."

6. Jesus says that we must bear fruit in order to be useful branches. There are three ways in which we can be useless. 1) We can refuse to listen to Jesus Christ at all. 2) We can listen to him, and then render him a lip service unsupported by any deeds. Or 3) We can accept him as Master, and then abandon him, either because of the difficulties of the way or because of our own desire to do as we like. It is a first principle of the New Testament that *uselessness invites disaster*. The fruitless branch is on the way to destruction.

I am the true vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned” (vv. 5-6).

Catholic insight: If we commit mortal sin, we have cut ourselves off from Jesus, the vine. See Fr. Key’s list of “Serious Sins.” These are listed in seven different passages from St. Paul. He says that those who commit these sins will not inherit the Kingdom of God! This is why the examination of conscience and the Sacrament of Penance is so very important. Let us work to stay connected to Jesus all the time.

7. Example of a personal grape vine. To be productive is to submit to a difficult and painful process. Pruning is very extensive and is annual, every year, not just a once in a life-time thing. Grapes are produced by first-year shoots only, and if the vine is too long, the grapes are not good.

8. Staying grafted on to Jesus: We want to stay connected to Jesus, during all the seasons of our lives. How can we do that? Mass attendance, Sacraments, Bible reading and devotional reading, regular prayers, especially the Rosary, and performing the Spiritual and Corporal works of mercy while avoiding mortal sins. It is most helpful to have friends with faith. Since the Church is the “Body of Christ”, it is particularly helpful to be involved in building up the fellowship of the Church. Let us remember that the most limiting factor in the growth of our parish, St. Boniface, is not lack of money. It is lack of teachers, catechists.

Spiritual Acts of Mercy		Corporal Acts of Mercy	
Instructing	Advising	Feeding the hungry	Sheltering the homeless
Consoling	Comforting,	Clothing the naked	Visiting the sick and imprisoned
Forgiving	Patiently forbearing	Burying the dead	Giving of alms to the poor

8. What are some of the benefits of being a fruit-bearing branch, well connected to Jesus, obeying the commandments of God? This obedient way of life has many benefits, one of which, unless we are persecuted for our faith, is prosperity, stability, happiness and joy in our earthly life. Remember the promise of Moses:

Here, therefore, I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the Lord, your God will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve other gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish; you will not have a long life on the land which your are crossing the Jordan to enter and occupy... I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse... (Deut. 30:15-20).

11. Sunday School 101: One commentator on late night radio several years ago asked his audience, “If you had been on the streets of Baltimore or on campus at Berkley and saw the looting going on, would you have joined in?” I am sure that none of you would have. This is like Sunday School 101, “You shall not steal.” How about all of us? How important is the content of Christianity and a personal relationship with God in answering our social problems? Is not the best answer to poverty and abuse the formation of solid, Christian families?

12. Taking into account the whole body politic. St Paul says, “When one part of the body suffers, all the body suffers. When one part is honored, all parts share in its joy” (1 Cor 12:26). In our communities the police should also behave with care and honor. All politicians should be considerate. Racism must be overcome. But we ourselves are all that we can really control so we need to be righteous, virtuous, and faithful to God regardless of what is going on around us.

13. Another way of asking this question could be: “Does poverty cause stealing, violence and corruption or does stealing, violence and corruption cause poverty? What is the solution for our inner cities? I am convinced that the only practical solution is a revival in which people again come to Jesus? What else might do it?

14. Summary: In invite everyone here to be committed to becoming fruitful, intentional disciples. If we are, we will be blessed in this life and saved in the life to come. Furthermore, we will be able to make a real difference in the world.

15. Where do you think you are in this process? What is your personal next step?