

Fifth Sunday of Easter April 29, 2018

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

During the Easter season the liturgy brings us closer to the resurrected Jesus and makes us realize that we are always united to him and him to us. He gives the invitation to all of us to enter into the true discipleship but in the context of the community. On his mission he sends his disciples two by two and teaches them to proclaim his kingdom as a community. He tells his chosen ones that where two or three gather in his name he is present in their midst. He takes the initiative to unite himself with us. Our life receives the full meaning when we are able to give ourselves to the service of others and find meaning in that service. Our true living comes by opening ourselves to God and to the world by becoming persons open to his will. The close identification of Jesus with the Father is the over-riding theme of today's Gospel passage. At the same time Jesus invites his followers to identify themselves with him and his mission. In this gospel passage from the last discourse of Jesus we hear Jesus say that he is the Vine and we are the branches. Without his initiative of being pruned, no branch can bear any fruit. He says that each one must bear fruit to the glory of the Father. In the first reading the misgivings about Paul's conversion are quickly dismissed as he boldly proclaims the gospel. In the second reading John insists that our love for others must be authentic. We are to believe in Jesus and keep God's commandment of loving one another.

In the First Reading of today we heard how Paul and the disciples of Jesus were striving to bear much fruit. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem to join the disciples, they were already shining in the fruit of the Spirit. When Paul tried to join them, the disciples avoided him with great fear. They knew that he had the reputation of persecuting the Christians. They were unable to believe that Paul was now one of them. Shining in the fruit of the Spirit, Barnabas came forward and took Paul to the apostles. On behalf of Paul, he explained to the apostles how Jesus had spoken to Paul and consequently how Paul had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. Now Barnabas testified his spiritual joy by sharing with the others the Divine intervention of Jesus in the life of Paul. He demanded from them the show love and kindness towards Paul. He aspired to see the growth of the Church and its children. Consequently, Paul preached the Word of God in Jerusalem with the disciples, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. Finally, when his life was threatened because of his service to the Lord, the believers took Paul to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. The Acts of the Apostles records the dedicated work of the early disciples. Their reward was to enjoy peace and growth in the number of those who joined the Church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Luke speaks of the peace enjoyed by the church and all the growth was attributed to the Holy Spirit.

John the Apostle in today's Second Reading instructs his disciples to love in truth and in action. He reminds them that love is more than mere words or feelings. True love shines in the keeping of promises that have been made and fulfilled in the deeds of the person. It is not surrounded by one broken promise after another. John says that God makes use of our deeds to reassure our hearts that he will not condemn us for our past sins. God's command is twofold: We are to believe in God's Son who saves us from our sins and love one another. It is then that we have the spirit's assurance that we are united to God. If we walk in the fruit of the Spirit, our spiritual life does not condemn us. If our spiritual life in Christ does

not condemn us, we have boldness before God. Because we obey his commandments and do what please him, we can ask God for anything that will spiritually benefit us and we will receive it. Through our actions, we are to bear much fruit as the disciples of Jesus. Through our faith in Jesus and our love towards others, the Heavenly Father is glorified. When worldly children are well behaved, through their actions, their parents are praised. When we as Christians bear much fruit, through our living faith in Christ, God the Father is glorified. God commands us to believe in the Name of Jesus and to love one another. Those who obey this command abide in Jesus and He abides in them. It is by the indwelling Holy Spirit who was given to us by God who will remain with us. For if we shine in the fruit of the Spirit, and then the Spirit of Jesus is within us. If the Spirit of Jesus is within us, then Jesus abides in us. Our new life in Christ encourages us to shine in the fruit before God.

Today's Gospel is part of the last discourse of Jesus delivered to the disciples at the Last Supper was a form of farewell address delivered on the eve of his death. Its purpose was to console and strengthen them to face the ordeals of the coming days. He told them not to be troubled in their heart but to trust in God. Today's passage describes the intimate union that must exist between Jesus and his followers, under the image of vine and its branches. His Father is the vinedresser who will encourage the good branches and cut off the useless ones. The fruit produced by the vine and the branches, by Christ and his followers, will be to God's eternal glory. The image of a vine or the vineyard to represent the chosen people of God was often used in the Old Testament. Israel was pictured as the vineyard of the Lord and the Jews as the branches of God's vine. The coins of the Maccabees had the symbol of vine and the Temple had the golden vine carved in front of the Holy Place. Now Jesus says that he and his followers will form the new chosen people. Once again Jesus uses the agricultural symbolism to express the divine mutuality that exists between the Father Son and the Disciples. Obviously, the vine, branches and the vine grower are used metaphorically. Still, the best way to understand what is being expressed is by considering the factual reality of how vines, branches and the vine growers function together. Just as the vine grower is the source of life for the vine, so the vine is the source of life for the branches. The vine is the source from which the branches receive their living water that gives them life and makes them bloom. If the living water was to be cut off from the branches, they would dry up, die and decay. Everything is inter-connected. For this intricate mutuality to work and bear fruit it is important that all parts stay inter connected. This is expressed by the key term, "remain" or "abide."

The first part of the passage stresses the necessity of remaining or abiding in Jesus. The Lord invites us to abide in him, and he will do so again several times during his discourse. This shows us how important it is to remain with him. Indeed, if we pay close attention to all the words of the Lord, we will soon note that Jesus insists on precisely this point: He will not abide in us unless we first abide in him. Jesus says: "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." Therefore it is absolutely necessary for the disciples to abide in Jesus. Those who do not abide in him will not be able to sustain life or bear fruit and therefore they will be cut off. The disciples however have been put in an ideal situation because they have been pruned by hearing the Word of God so that they are prepared to bear even more fruit. Discipleship is not an individual enterprise carried out in isolation. Key for understanding the discipleship is to remember Jesus is the vine and the disciples are the branches. Comparing Himself to the true vine that gives life to the branches, Jesus states that the Heavenly Father is the vine

grower. This parallel echoes the fact that it is the Heavenly Father who sent Jesus, his only beloved Son, for the salvation of mankind. Also, it is the Father who has granted the Son to have life in him as he, the Father, has life in himself. It is important to note that Jesus speaks in a particular order: first he expresses the fact that the Church must abide in him, and then he speaks of the fact that he himself is called to abide in the Church. The first is the condition of the second.

The second part of the passage emphasizes what happens to those who abide in Jesus as well as those who do not. The goal of discipleship is not just simple relationship in itself. The real goal is the fruit that such a relationship produces. For discipleship to bear fruit there must be mutual abiding between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus tells them that if they abide in him and his words abide in them, they could ask whatever they wanted, and it shall be done for them. This is a very powerful statement that gives us a clue as to how we must pray. If we pray to God and expect to receive a positive response, then we should shine in the fruit of the Spirit. By obeying God, by abiding in Jesus and Jesus in us, we have the assurance that God the Father will hear and answer our prayers that will spiritually benefit us and others. He further says that by this the Father is glorified, that they bear much fruit, and have proved to be his disciples. Here Jesus teaches us what we must do in order to abide in him. The word abide indicates an affectionate term to remain with. The words of Jesus will abide in us, when we meditate deeply upon them and become one with them. For it is then that the Word of God itself will come into us in order to abide and rest in our souls. Thus when the Word of God abides in us and if we are children of God in Christ, then we can glorify God our Father, he who has created us in his Son, and who does not cease recreating us in him, the Christ, the Lord of the entire universe.

Those disciples who do not abide in Jesus cut themselves off from their source of life. They will be like the branches which wither and die as they are not attached to the vine. At the same time, it is not enough to be an ordinary branch on the tree. It also must produce much fruit. It is not just enough to be a Christian and fulfil one's religious duties and Sunday obligations. A Christian should be one who follows the commands of Jesus to love his neighbour. Jesus insists that if they persevere in their sinful attitudes and fail in their duty as the followers of Christ, they will be cut off from the life giving vine, Jesus himself. This renders them useless for anything other than for being thrown into the fire and burnt. On the other hand those disciples who remain in Jesus and have an intimate union with him, create a situation where whatever they ask of the Father will be done for them. They are empowered for fruitfulness. At the same time Jesus tells his disciples that they are made clean by his word and they are certain to bear fruit. The fruit that he tells us is the fruit of the spirit who is indwelling in us. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the virtues that must shine through us so that we may remain attached to the vine as our source of life. Such a Christian prayer will always be according to the will of God. The pinnacle of that fruitfulness is making visible the glory of the Father. It is only through the way that we live that people will be inspired to follow our footsteps and discover what we have discovered: the joy of knowing God's love that comes to us through Jesus and his Church.

Jesus speaks to us today of his Father and of his activity in the world. That is his mission among us: to reveal to us who the Father is, to tell us what he does and what he intends to do in response to our actions. As we celebrate the Eucharist today and live the word of God,

we ask the grace that we may overcome the allurements of the world and remain united with Jesus the true vine. The Gospel tells us today that our relationship to Jesus is similar to a tree and its branches. The branch cannot be separated from the parent tree and continue to live independently. Christ has promised to remain with us during our life only if we remain close to him. If we walk in the fruit of the Spirit, our spiritual life does not condemn us. If our spiritual life in Christ does not condemn us, we can stand boldly before God, and ask him for anything that will spiritually benefit us or others, and we will receive them generously. God's command is that we believe in Jesus and in him love one another. Those who obey this command abide in Jesus and he abides in them. It is by the indwelling Holy Spirit who was given to us by God who will remain with us. For if we shine in the fruit of the Spirit, and then the Spirit of Jesus is within us. If the Spirit of Jesus is within us, then Jesus abides in us. So let us prepare ourselves for today's Eucharist: let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary to be with us this great sacrament, and through it abide forever in God.

A teacher from Primary School asked her students to write an essay about what they would like God to do for them. At the end of the day, while marking the essays, she read one that made her very emotional. Her husband, who had just walked in, saw her crying and asked her: 'What happened?' She answered- 'Read this. It is one of my students' essay.' The essay went like this: Oh God, tonight I ask you something very special: Make me into a television. I want to take its place and live like the TV in my house. Have my own special place, and have my family around ME, to be taken seriously when I talk. I want to be the centre of attention and be heard without interruptions or questions. I want to receive the same special care that the TV receives even when it is not working. Have the company of my dad when he arrives home from work, even when he is tired. I want my mom to want me when she is sad and upset, instead of ignoring me. I also want my brothers to fight to be with me. I want to feel that family just leaves everything aside, every now and then, just to spend some time with me. Last but not least, ensure that I can make them all happy and entertain them. Lord I don't ask you for much. I just want to live like a TV. At that moment the husband said: "My God, poor kid. What horrible parents." The wife looked up at him and said: "That essay is written by our son."

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India