

5th Sunday of Easter

Just as branches of the vine are united with the trunk, so also the disciples (we) should be united with Jesus to bear much fruit of love and give glory to the Father. Today's gospel passage deals with the strong bond of union that should exist between Jesus and his disciples in order to bear much fruit. It has its background in the OT, in which the people of Israel are called the vineyard of the Lord (Is 5:7). God cared for Israel so dearly and expected to see sweet grapes in her. Instead, she yielded wild grapes. In the words of prophet Isaiah, God expected fruits of "justice and righteousness" in her, but saw "bloodshed and cry" (Is 5:7), due to her unfaithfulness to God.

If Jesus is the real vine, his disciples are the branches of this vine and the Father is the vinedresser or gardener (15:1). The branches can have life and grow only in so far as they are united with the trunk (who is Jesus himself). The trunk of the vine or any other tree/plant/creeper supplies the sustenance of life for the branches. Similarly, the disciples should be united with Jesus to have life and to bear much fruit.

As the gardener, the Father takes care of the vine by pruning the fruitless or barren branches and trimming the fruitful ones. His work is compared to the twofold duties of a gardener: (1) cutting off fruitless branches which consume the sap from the fruit bearing branches that will result in a poor yield; and (2) constantly trimming the fruit bearing branches so that they bear more fruit.

Originally, this pruning and trimming might have referred to persecution the disciples will have to face because of their faith. The Father's will is that his disciples bear the fruit of love, that is, love shown in action or through deeds of mercy towards the needy.

What is the condition for bearing much fruit? "to abide" ("to dwell" or "to remain") in Jesus. It refers to a permanent, deep friendship or an intimate relationship between Jesus and disciples. It is like the nearest and dearest relationship in life. This type of personal communion is absolutely necessary to be fruitful in love/ service/ care/ concern/ sacrifice.

By baptism, we are attached into the Divine Vine (Jesus). In today's gospel, Jesus invites us to strengthen our relationship with him by constantly 'abiding' in him. Each one of us has to

reflect on how we can live a life of close union and personal intimacy with the Risen Lord. It is through faith, prayer, meditation on the Word of God and devout participation in the sacraments. These are the means, by which his life flows into us and seals the bond of communion between him and us. Without this personal intimacy with the Risen Lord, we shall be cut off from the source of divine life and become like withered branches.

Our deeper friendship with Jesus and through him with the Father brings a qualitative difference in our life. It fills us with God's qualities like love, peace, joy and patience. All our good actions flow from our close union with Jesus. As the spiritual author Henry Nouwen says: "It is in intimacy with God that we develop a greater intimacy with people."

Even if we are closely united with Jesus, we still have to undergo the pain of occasional pruning and trimming. A spiritual pruning and purification are necessary for our spiritual growth because it helps us to have, a constant uprooting of evil and purification of our minds from negative or sinful attitudes. Secondly, pruning is a wonderful medicine for our pride. It removes our ego and prevents it from getting puffed up so that we learn to depend on God more than our own capabilities.

Thirdly, sometimes God himself may prune us in the form of a serious illness, a loss of material possessions or job, a persecution or slander from our personal enemies or enemies of our religion, a fatal accident and a sudden death of a loved one. Sometimes God permits sufferings and trials to fall on us in order to cleanse us. When this kind of pruning hurts us, we wonder why he does it only to us and not to others. We may be questioning in our mind: "Why me? What mistake have I done?" It is our abiding in Jesus that gives meaning to our suffering. Finally, purification is needed to make us aware of the need for a deeper communion with total dependency on Jesus, because without him we can do nothing. Instead of depending on the Real Vine (the Risen Christ), some of us will depend on some other 'vine,' for example, dependency is on bank accounts; for some others on power, position, popularity, possessions and pleasures.

The Heavenly Father is indeed glorified, when we are closely united with Jesus, the True Vine, and bear much fruit. Our greatest joy is to bring glory to God by our conduct because by

seeing us, people can be attracted to God or to his values. When we bear such fruits we show ourselves to be the Disciples of Christ.