

HOMILY 5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR B
“Abide in Me and Love One Another” (Jn 15:1-8)

A mother gave her restless child in Church a rosary to occupy him. She heard a noise and turned to see him swinging the rosary and saying. “Hang on Jesus, you’re going for a ride!”

Did you know that in France, there is a protocol around grapes? When traveling by a vineyard, you can stop and feast on grapes all you want, but do not break off a branch to take along. As well, when passing by a table with grapes, do not reach out and take only one grape; you must break off a small cluster and eat the whole cluster.

In today’s gospel, Jesus uses a grape vine, a symbol common to the religions of the Mediterranean and to Jewish literature, to teach an important lesson: believe in Him and love one another.

That message, actually, comes right out of the second reading from 1 John: “This is God’s commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

The message is clear: believe in Jesus, and love one another. Faith and fellowship would be another way of putting it.

To illustrate this, Jesus uses the image of a vine in such a strong way that it emerges as a figure, almost like the “shepherd” or “gate” images he uses elsewhere. What is Jesus teaching us here?

To explain the image, the vineyard is the Kingdom, the reign of God that Jesus came to inaugurate. The gardener or vinedresser is God, the Father. It is God who plants, prunes, tills and tends the garden. The true vine is Jesus. He is true because he comes from the one true God. The old vine, Israel, was not true because it was never able to live as God’s chosen people but was always unfaithful.

The branches are the disciples, us, followers of Jesus, called to learn to really love God, our selves and others. We are pruned by self awareness, by the Word of God that helps us see ourselves as we are, that leads us to repentance and conversion.

What is important here is the inter-relationship between the vine, the branches and the vine dresser. All three are essential for the plant to bear fruit. The relationship that Jesus has with the Father, and the relationship that Jesus has with us, is crucial for us to bear fruit.

Also included here is John’s image of Church as non-hierarchical interrelationship and mutual accountability. All that matters for John is that each member is rooted in Christ and involved in acting out of love as a community.

The first thing we have to do is to believe in Jesus. In the first reading, St. Paul is a radical example of that kind of faith. He who did not believe in Jesus, who thought Jesus was an imposter, who was persecuting his followers, ended up encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus one day and that changed his life. When he heard Jesus identify himself with the persons he was persecuting, his whole belief system came tumbling down. It took blindness, vulnerability, dependence on community, prayer and fasting, to make that mind-boggling transition from unbelief, to belief; from persecuting the followers of Jesus, to becoming one of them; from putting them in prison, to preaching that Jesus is the Son of God.

Our experience may never be that radical. However, if we are to bear fruit, we must put all our faith and trust in Jesus, and get to know him better through prayer, worship, and pondering his Word. He must live and move in us if we are to witness him to others, and love them as he loves them.

The fruit that Jesus speaks of is justice, love, caring, right relationships with God, others, ourselves and all of creation. It is achieving intimacy with others through trust and acceptance. It is above all the ability to forgive others and to even love ones enemies, those who hurt us.

The only one who can truly do that, of course, is Jesus himself, the Son of God. To cling to him, be rooted in him, through intimate prayer and pondering his Word, is to become like him, to do what he does. Perhaps the sap that runs from the vine to the branches is an image of the kind of prayer that keeps us grounded in Jesus and that will help us to bear the kind of fruit that he wants.

An example of this is Ron Rolheiser, an Oblate who is president of Oblate College in San Antonio, Texas. He is renowned as a spiritual writer and a speaker. His talks are captivating and spell binding, as he weaves together biblical images, theological teachings, books he has read, movies he has seen, music he has heard, and his own personal experience to touch the hearts and minds of his hearers. The reaction he often gets is like that of Jesus' friends and neighbours: "Where does he get all this? Is he not from Cactus Lake, Saskatchewan?" His is a very fruitful life because he is grounded in faith in Jesus and thus able to give of himself for the good of others.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is our way of abiding together in Jesus as a faith family, listening and proclaiming his word, receiving his Body and Blood, and then going out empowered to bear fruit by loving as he did.

So, be a faithful branch. Believe in Jesus' name; abide in him, and love one another as he has loved us.