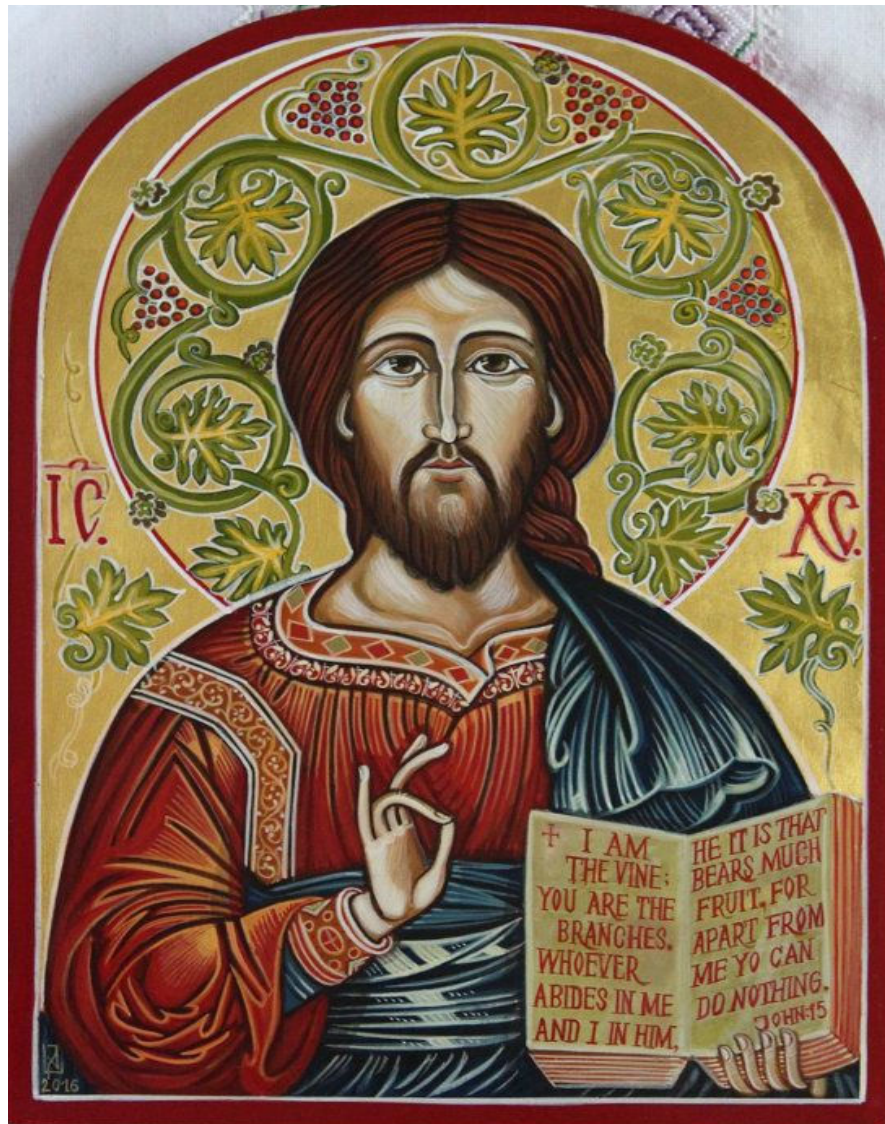


the Sunday Readings



I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit.
(John 15 : 5a)

5th Sunday of Easter
Life in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus – Part V

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Life in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus – Part V

*about being fruitful disciples*¹

introduction

The community of disciples is imaged in today's gospel as branches growing from, *the Vine (Christ)*. The branches are tended and pruned by *the Vinedresser (God)*. Wine is a symbol of both happiness and love. The horticultural images link *life in the spirit of the risen Jesus* with *the role of the community of Christian disciples*. The vine is the plant of love. The loving actions of a community united to Christ, show the unconditional living out the commandment to love. Solidarity with the risen Jesus is the condition for bearing fruit. This bond defines us as, '*the new people of God*'.

first reading: Acts 9 : 26 – 31²

[Paul in Jerusalem]

When Paul had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. (26) But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. (27) So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. (28) He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him; (29) When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. (30) Meanwhile, the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria, had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (31)

Acts describes the handing on by the newly converted Paul, of Jesus' skills of living and his *power-for-loving*. Paul will eventually announce the gospel of Jesus among emerging and neglected people, including especially the uncircumcised. In time, he will show such people how the liberation he experienced in his calling by God, prevails over every destructive anti-life force. Disciples like Paul, show the liberated life in Jesus' spirit prevails over the forces of destruction.

Luke presents Paul as '*blinded*' after the encounter with the Jesus-voice.³ The voice of Ananias restores his sight.⁴ Paul spent only a few days with the disciples in Damascus,⁵ which in normal circumstances would hardly be long enough to accomplish an adequate apprenticeship in the spirit of the Living Torah

1 Cover image: Jesus Christ with the vine leaves A hand-made Byzantine style icon.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 Ac.9:8-9

4 *Ibid.* vv.17-19

5 *Ibid.* v.20

of Jesus. That would hold true for most people – but not Paul. He had previous training in God's Torah under Gamaliel,⁶ and had become an expert on, "*the Way of Jesus*" due to his role in questioning and refuting the disciples of Jesus he had taken prisoner. But Paul's expertise about "*the Way of Jesus*" was from the perspective of an outsider.⁷ Following his conversion, Paul needed time to re-orient – just as much as his former victims needed time to sort out their stance towards this outsider-turned-insider. Barnabus helped initially to allay the Jerusalem community's suspicion of Paul (v.27), but he soon left and not until three years later did he return to Jerusalem with Barnabus.⁸

Paul makes the claim that his, '*gospel to the uncircumcised*', lacks nothing of the message of the other apostles. The other disciples had been the original focus of Jesus' transforming efforts and they acknowledge that Paul's apprenticing in the Gospel of Jesus is in no way, inferior to their own apprenticeship.⁹ What Jesus had done for the Twelve apostles, he does through a different form of apprenticing for Paul. Paul's shaking the hands of '*the pillars*' of the Jerusalem church, seal the validity of their partnership in promoting Jesus' message – the one to the gentiles; and Paul to the uncircumcised.

Paul depended, up to a point, on the tradition he had received from those who were Christians before him, about the events that had happened before his call. When he begins to preach and dispute with the Greek-speaking Hebrews in Jerusalem, in the first flush of his conversion, danger arises.¹⁰ For his own safety he is assisted out of Jerusalem (v.30). A positive result from this experience of Paul's early hot-headedness, is that Christian community is propelled to become multi-national and multi-cultural in ways unforeseen by the more sedate Jerusalem community (v.31).¹¹ Paul will become a model of the Christian community who are linked with the apostles. His experience of spreading the message among different peoples will be different – but he is united in a profound partnership with the other apostles, in the spirit of the gospel of Jesus. Paul '*walks with*' the other apostles, *the Way of Jesus*. He voices the same

6 Cf. Ac.22:3

7 Ac.22:17-18

8 Ga.2:1

9 *Ibid.* vv.7-10

10 [v.29] '*Hellenists . . . the Hebrews*' – the *Hellenists* were not necessarily Jews from the diaspora, but were more probably Palestinian Jews who spoke only Greek. *The Hebrews* were Palestinian Jews who spoke Hebrew, or Aramaic, and who may also have spoken Greek. Both groups belong to the Jerusalem Jewish Christian community. The conflict between them leads to a restructuring of the community that will better serve the community's needs. The real purpose of the whole episode, however, is to introduce Stephen as a prominent figure in the community whose long speech and martyrdom will be recounted in Ac.7.

11 [vv.31ff] In the context of the period of peace enjoyed by the community through the cessation of Paul's activities against it, Luke goes on to introduce two traditions concerning the miraculous power exercised by Peter as he was making a tour of places where the Christian message had already been preached. The towns of Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa were populated by both Jews and Gentiles and their Christian communities may well have been mixed.

message as they voice. The message of the resurrection of Christ will spread far and wide. The growth of the community is not as important as the quality of that growth.

response: Psalm 22 : 25 – 27, 29 – 31

[a plea for deliverance from suffering and hostility]

*From You comes my praise
in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay
before those who fear him.(25)
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!(26)
All the ends of the Earth
shall remember and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.(27) . . .
For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.(28)
To him, indeed, shall all
who sleep in the Earth bow down;
before him shall bow
all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.(29)
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told
about the Lord,(30)
and proclaim his deliverance
to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.(31)*

The speaker is aware that destiny is in God's hands and has no doubt that God can and may transform the situation .The first part of the Psalm is about the suffering of the righteous '*servant of God*' (vv.1-21). The part of the psalm used today, refers to the vindication of *the righteous One* precisely in his suffering. The speaker's reference to the lot of the powerless '*poor*' (v.26) is a reminder of this. *The suffering vindicated One* speaks praise and worships (v.29). The response that Israelites make to the assurances of the Lord God, is praise.

The pleas of the suffering ones, turn to praise and worship (vv.27 & 29).¹² The praising happens when the isolation of alienation and the denial of rage are overcome enough, to allow speech. Praise happens when people are free enough to participate in their proper calling, which is the yielding of their lives to the Lord (vv.29-31). The conversation in prayer is two-way. The Israelites cry out in their hurt to the Lord and God responds with a saving intervention. The peoples'

¹² [v.27] '*The poor*' – those who were dependent on the Lord; the term (*anawim*) came to include the religious sense of '*humble*', '*pious*', '*devout*'.

response is praise. This conversation permits the people to become who they were shaped by God to be – and who they yearn to become.

second reading: 1 John 3 : 18 – 24¹³

[Love one another]

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (18) And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him (19) whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (20) Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; (21) and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. (22) And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (23) All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (24)

There are many ways of seeking God. However only an active love can assure us of communion with the God who is love. In the gospel, Jesus urges disciples to, 'remain in Me', in order to be able to produce fruit.¹⁴ Practical acts of loving show disciples are living out this communion with Jesus (vv.18 & 23). Belief and loving actions are a response to *the power-for-life* or *grace*, God released through Jesus Christ. Through the practise of love the disciple knows that God truly is *the power for life-giving* in the universe (vv.18-19).

Love, put into practice, surprises the believer with the accepting power of God and leads to confident, bold praying (vv.21-22). The writer announces an essential principle about the working of conscience (v.21). If we think that the God of conscience is erratic and makes everything hinge on the consistently flawless function of our conscience mechanism, we would be paralysed and unable to do anything. The principle is put simply: – ' . . . , *And by this we will know that we are from the Truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*' (vv.19-20). The God that the writer presents can handle all the foul-ups and works with what is given. A person is more than his or her morality. The God of the Scriptures copes with human malfunctions better than we do.

This principle reinforces the fact that God is more interested in disciples getting down to practical action and less interested in any tendency to stay inside their own heads. Our feelings are not meant to make us cowards. They are meant

¹³ Love, even to the point of self-sacrifice, is the point of the commandment. The story of Cain and Abel (1 Jn.3:12-15; Gn.4:1-16) presents the rivalry of two brothers, in a contrast of evil and righteousness, where envy led to murder. For Christians, proof of deliverance is love toward others, after the example of Christ. This includes concrete acts of charity, out of our material abundance. Living a life of faith in Jesus and of Christian love, assures us of abiding in God no matter what our feelings may at times tell us. Our obedience gives us confidence in prayer and trust in God's judgment. This obedience includes our belief in Christ and love for one another.

¹⁴ Cf. Jn.15:4

to lead us to energetic action in the world. It would be sad for disciples to use the voice of God to suppress *the spark of the Spirit*. True knowledge of God includes the belief that in Jesus' humanity is where God's WORD is spoken. In the synoptics, discipleship is defined as '*doing the Will*', or, '*doing the WORD of God*'.¹⁵ The stress is on repentance or reform of our human actions. In the tradition of John, what transforms is the WORD spoken by Jesus.¹⁶ The only real sin is to refuse to believe in Jesus.¹⁷

gospel reading: John 15:1-8

[Jesus the true vine]

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.(1) He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.(2)

Jesus at supper before the Passover had just given his friends the wine cup, symbol of his blood-poured-out in love.¹⁸ Now Jesus presents himself as the true vine which responds at last to the Vinedresser's care. The disciples are grafted on to this vine; one with it, they bear fruit. Cut off, they will be burned. Pruned by trial, they will bear much fruit. Jesus says branches grow off him and some don't bear fruit (v.2a).¹⁹ Jesus seems to suggest two kinds of suffering. The cutting off of those who are useless. And the pruning of those who produce – so that they will produce more.

You have already been cleansed by the WORD that I have spoken to you.(3) Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.(4)

To be united to Jesus is to be united to others – to be united in community. Though a small community, they are united to a larger community of Jesus' disciples. Just as a small branch is joined to a bigger branch – all the vine-branches together – are Christ. Branches don't bear fruit unless they're united to the whole plant. It is likewise with the disciples and *the community in the spirit of Jesus*. Pruning useless branches ought to be done by the people, through society's justice. Jesus says in this passage, that the Father does the pruning. It seems to me that the Father does it through people. Jesus is saying that he is the people and we, the people, will be united with him by being united with the people (v.4).

15 Cf. Mk.3:35, Mt.12:50, Lk.8:21

16 1 Jn.5:1-5

17 1 Jn.3:23 – The secessionist's lack of interest in commandments, may have been shaped by a lack of specific moral and ethical demands in the tradition. In the letter, the author holds together things that are often separated in our thinking – faith and works, belief and obedience, the prayer of union with God and neighbour-love. For the Christian disciple, belief isn't a matter of either/or, but of both/and!

18 Jn.13:4

19 The labels – '*Christian*', '*Catholic*', '*Evangelical*', or '*Pentecostal*' – of themselves don't prove that a person is joined with the true Vine. Would-be disciples, who show no mercy to others and who don't love their neighbours, are branches that bear no fruit! The loveless or merciless branch will be eliminated (Jn.15:2b)!

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.(5) Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.(6) If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.(7) My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.(8)

Wine in the Scriptures is a symbol of happiness and love. So the grapevine is the plant of love. The pruning of humanity is to produce more love. There's going to be lashings of wine. But to get a large quantity of wine, many branches have to be pruned back. Jesus affirms this shortly before his death. He had his own death in mind. And he could have been thinking of the deaths of the many others who would follow his way.

A part of humanity is going to be, 'cut off' in order that there will be no injustice in humanity. Later, Jesus says the Father will give those who remain in him, anything they ask (vv.7 & 16). 'In His name' (v.16) means, 'in Jesus' spirit'. It is asking, 'in the name', while the one who asks is united in accord with Jesus' teachings – the teachings of equality. And those who ask in that way, infallibly receive whatever they ask, because with Jesus they are united with 'God', 'Love', 'the Author of the universe', 'the Vinedresser'.

for sharing:²⁰

- *Paul in Jerusalem. Comment on Acts 9 : 26 - 31.*
- *The command to love. Comment on 1 John 3 : 18 – 24*
- *Jesus the true Vine. Comment on John 15 : 1 – 8*

prayer:²¹

*O God,
You graft us onto Christ, the true vine,
and, with tireless care,*

20 Lectio Divina: There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'.

21 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*You nurture our growth
in knowledge and reverence.
Tend the vineyard of Your Church,
that in Christ each branch may bring forth
to the glory of Your name
abundant fruits of faith and love.
Grant this through Jesus Christ,
the resurrection and the life,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.*

the review:²²

The Vine and branches image, defines our worship. We disciples are invited to think of our sharing in the once-and-for-all sacrificial death of Jesus, as our 'pruning' in order to produce even more fruit. In the moment of worship we come to the threshold of where the unfinished work of producing the fruit of the Spirit, can be renewed.

Only as receivers of the gift of Jesus' spirit can we determine the extent we permit the new awareness of God's saving reality, to prune back our old ways of living. The liturgy and its presenters provide the material for us to cut away the deadwood. But permission to prune, belongs to us the hearers of the liturgical texts. We must host this precious moment with patient awe. It makes serious transformation – the production of more fruits of the spirit – possible.

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²² the review: – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.