

## HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Sunday, 2 May 2021

Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

### PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 53

#### Reading I Acts 9:26-31

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples,  
but they were all afraid of him,  
not believing that he was a disciple.

Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles,  
and he reported to them how he had seen the Lord,  
and that he had spoken to him,  
and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.  
He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem,  
and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord.  
He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists,  
but they tried to kill him.

And when the brothers learned of this,  
they took him down to Caesarea  
and sent him on his way to Tarsus.

The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace.  
It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord,  
and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers.

#### Responsorial Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32

R. (26a) I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.  
I will fulfill my vows before those who fear the LORD.

The lowly shall eat their fill;  
they who seek the LORD shall praise him:

“May your hearts live forever!”

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

All the ends of the earth  
shall remember and turn to the LORD;

all the families of the nations  
shall bow down before him.

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

To him alone shall bow down  
all who sleep in the earth;  
before him shall bend  
all who go down into the dust.  
R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.  
And to him my soul shall live;  
my descendants shall serve him.  
Let the coming generation be told of the LORD  
that they may proclaim to a people yet to be born  
the justice he has shown.  
R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

**Reading II 1 Jn 3:18-24**

Children, let us love not in word or speech  
but in deed and truth.  
Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth  
and reassure our hearts before him  
in whatever our hearts condemn,  
for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.  
Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us,  
we have confidence in God  
and receive from him whatever we ask,  
because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.  
And his commandment is this:  
we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,  
and love one another just as he commanded us.  
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 he gave us.

**Alleluia Jn 15:4a, 5b**

R. Alleluia, alleluia.  
Remain in me as I remain in you, says the Lord.  
Whoever remains in me will bear much fruit.  
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

**Gospel Jn 15:1-8**

Jesus said to his disciples:  
"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.  
He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,  
and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.  
You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.  
Remain in me, as I remain in you.  
Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own

unless it remains on the vine,  
so neither can you unless you remain in me.  
I am the 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.  
If you remain in me and my words remain in you,  
ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.  
By this is my Father glorified,  
that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

## **PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS**

I need some advice.

A number of you who will read this homily know about pruning grapevines – in fact, you know a lot more than I do about tending vines. I have some grapevines that might need pruning. I don't know for sure. I need advice about this.

Here's the story. A few weeks ago, my brother and sister-in-law pruned their Muscat vines that are growing in their backyard over in Petaluma. They gave me some cuttings and I planted the cuttings in my backyard with my buddy Antonio. By the way, Antonio calls the cuttings “little sticks” (*palitos*).

Now, there was some doubt in my family as to whether or not the *palitos* would take root and bud.

Oh ye of little faith!

The *palitos* are growing like gangbusters. Just about every one has two – yes two! – buds coming out. Some of them are even pushing out leaves already. There's vigor in the vineyard.

I am, of course, very pleased to see these little miracles in my backyard. But, as I said, I also need advice. Should I cut off the top bud on each cutting? Will this make the remaining bud more vigorous? Pruning a vine with discernment can be crucial to an abundant harvest in the fall.

This is the upshot of the Gospel for today.

Jesus tells us

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.  
He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,  
and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

Jesus is not just talking about himself. We are part of the vine and the Father prunes us as well. Jesus is giving us, here among the vines in Sonoma, a beautiful metaphor for the Church.

You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.  
Remain in me, as I remain in you.  
Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own  
unless it remains on the vine,  
so neither can you unless you remain in me

I like very much the fact that Jesus thinks of us as “already pruned.” Realizing that we are “already pruned” helps us to understand important things about ourselves.

Reflect on this for a moment.

As I look back on my life, I am trying to see that some of what I have suffered is really part of a process of being pruned. For me, the challenge is to try to see that we are being pruned for a reason. And here is the reason:

I am the vine, you are the branches.  
Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit,  
because without me you can do nothing.

Easter faith, as I have said before, is a process of learning how to see. We need to learn how to see our suffering correctly. Suffering – or at least some suffering - is part of the pruning process. And only by being pruned will we bear “much fruit.”

Reflecting on being “already pruned” is a beneficial spiritual practice.

I have an old friend who is an accomplished winemaker and viticulturalist. He knows how to prune a vine in order to get maximum production of the highest quality fruit in his vineyard.

I can also say that my friend knows what it is to be “already pruned.” He served our country in Vietnam, during the civil war there. He saw a lot of action. He does not go into the details about what he saw, but he did tell me this story.

In 2014, many years after his service during the war, my friend returned to Vietnam on a business trip. During this visit, my friend was invited into the home of a Vietnamese man.

Right there in the living room, the host had a picture of himself dressed as a North Vietnamese colonel posing with Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the communist insurgency.

My friend was obviously troubled to think he was in the home of a man he was trying to kill when they were both younger men. His host could see this. So the retired colonel, with great gentleness, asked my friend a simple question,

“Did you fight here in my country?”

After saying this, the retired colonel took a shrimp off his plate and laid it gracefully on my friend’s plate. Then he, again with great gentleness, said,

“I am glad that you have come back to my country to see it again.”

As Catholics, of course, we see this simple gesture in eucharistic terms. The story offers us a great example of how our life together in the Eucharist teaches us how to see the world correctly. What took place in the Vietnamese colonel’s home is what takes place within our hearts at mass. In every Eucharist, there is a Resurrection in which holy communion takes the place of our fear, our distrust, our loneliness and the violence that marks us all in different ways.

But we have to understand the eucharistic character of the Resurrection correctly. Every Eucharist is a resurrection in which we come to the realization that we are “already pruned.”

As the Vietnamese colonel placed that shrimp on his plate, my friend came to a realization that he had already been released from his fear and distrust of his former enemy. And in this release from loneliness, my friend realized that there had already been a healing of the memories of violence that marked him from the war.

In effect, my friend realized that he was “already pruned.” This is the realization that we call “Easter.”

I like this word, “realization.” It means two things at once. It means “to become aware of” and, at the same time, it means “to make real and tangible.” In the realization that we are “already pruned,” we come to a sudden awareness that the Risen Lord has been quietly healing us, pruning away all that does not produce an abundant harvest within our troubled souls. At the same time, this realization makes this abundant harvest real and tangible in our lives. The realization produces “much fruit” that will be of benefit to all those around us.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.  
He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,  
and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.  
Remain in me, as I remain in you.

Remember that my friend is an accomplished wine maker and viticulturalist. I am going to ask him what Antonio and I should do with our *palitos*. They are bursting with life. Just about every one of them has two buds. The leaves are pushing out. There's vigor in the vineyard. Should we do a little pruning?

I need advice about this. I'm sure my friend will know just what to do.

### **PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA***

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as "a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys"). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don't rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually "reading" the Bible. Rather, we are "listening" to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?