

May 3, 2015
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Church of St. Leo the Great – Oakland, CA
Homily: Brent Howitt Otto SJ

Reading **1ACTS 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 **PS 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 [21 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.”

Homily

The scriptures we just heard raise the question: **What does it mean for us to call ourselves Christians?** The early Christians had to grapple with this as they were trying to form a community of believers who strongly felt empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the liberating message of Christ with others. But it's important for you and me too, especially those of us who were born Christian. To be Christian means **we are choosing** to believe and live our lives in a certain way, along with others; and we can make that choice only because we were chosen first by God.

For myself I was brought back to this choice – not my own choice so much as Christ choosing me – a couple years ago at the Easter Vigil Mass. It was the point when several adults were being baptized. After each person is baptized with water in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, the priest says to each one: “you are made a new creation in Christ”.

Well, when I heard that, I heard it addressed to me. And Jesus asked me “*Do you believe that? Do you believe I have made you a new creation in me?*” Moved to tears the response of my heart was “Yes, I believe it!” And I felt joy, and peace and renewed confidence.

Being claimed by Christ and made a new creation in him makes us different. Newness. Change. Conversion. Companionship with Christ as his disciple, his friend. We are not alone and we live for a vision bigger than ourselves and longer than our life on earth.

This is what happened to Saul in the first reading. He had been a Pharisee and persecuted Christians viciously. He thought it was his job to do that. He believed he was doing the right thing. But then on his way to Damascus he had a religious experience when Christ came to him and turned his life around.

So when he comes to the apostles in Jerusalem they are afraid of him. But they don't drive him away, but let him tell them his story. He told them about his conversion. He was no longer Saul, the persecutor of Christians but Paul, a disciple of Christ and one eager to share his faith with others. Amazingly they believed him. They took a chance no doubt, and welcomed him into their company. They widened the circle, even believing that a man who had formerly been an enemy could now be a friend and fellow co-worker in Christ's mission. Later, we read that Paul was persecuted by the Hellenists (that is, the Greek pagans) and they protected him by sending him to Tarus, where he goes on to spread the Good News.

Can we forgive others? Can we listen to their story of growth and change and be open enough to believe it?

After all, you and I want to be forgiven by others. We certainly want people to have hope enough in us, that we will not be judged by our past faults or shortcomings. We want others to hear our story of growth and change for the better.

When we can do this for one another, we build community – nothing less than the Family of God.

Now the early Christian community certainly wasn't always tension-free. Even Peter and Paul had disagreements. But they didn't break their unity over it. They worked them out with prayer and discussion, trusting the sincerity of each other's experience of Christ. All of them shared the same Lord and brother, Jesus. All had been called uniquely. All of them were attempting to pray, live, love and work, as the new creations in Christ whom God had made them to be. We sure can take a lesson from this with our own present day tensions and disagreements within the Church. Even more so, within our often divisive national politics.

Jesus gives us such a beautiful metaphor for our life in Christ in today's gospel. God the Father is a vine grower. Jesus is the vine. And we are the branches. The vine grower meticulously nurtures the growth of the vine by watering and fertilizing the soil, but pruning the dead twigs to make room for real growth, so that good fruit will come forth. Jesus is the vine, the source of water and nutrients up from the roots, and the unity that holds the entire plant together as ONE. We are branches, who get all that we need from the vine and the care of the vine grower. As with grape vines, branches are often grafted on. You can see our baptism as this grafting on to the vine of Christ. We are made a new creation, given a new identity, a new source of life and a whole world of potential opens up. Our job is to grow and change, to reach out for that sunlight. And in taking it in, to produce good fruit for the world. Though the fruit is eaten, seeds are sown for the future. The Vine grower keeps coming around and pruning the dead wood...those dead-ends we may have grown towards. It's humbling to be pruned. But those parts of ourselves have to go. They don't bear fruit, because they'd grown away from the light. But the hands of the vine grower are not harsh and arbitrary, but rather loving and nurturing.

Let's sit with this beautiful metaphor in a few ways this week.

- Am I aware of the nourishment Jesus the vine provides for me and my life and growth? How can I claim this nourishment and grow towards the light?
- What kind of fruit am I bearing? Is it benefiting others? Or do I let it fall to the ground and rot?
- Is there any pruning I could use? Is God trying to do some pruning right now in the events of my life? Can I accept it humbly as an opportunity for growth in Christ, rather than an occasion of loss?
- Am I aware of the branches around me, all part of the same vine? Am I grateful for them? Do I celebrate the kind of fruit that they bear, even if it's different from mine?

More than anything...

"You—each one of you—is made a new creation in Christ. Do you believe it? Then let that newness, change, possibility, potential, and flow through you and bear great fruit.