

April 29, 2018

Acts 9:26-31; 1 John 3:18-24; Jn 15:1-8

Back in my days in the monastery I used to pay a lot of attention to the plants and foliage around the place. Our monastery ran a college, and one day one of the students was working on grounds crew and given the job of trimming the ivy on the main building - it had been growing over the windows. Only problem is he just cut around the window openings, not really thinking what would happen to the plant farther up the wall if he cut the vine leading to it. Whole areas of the vines on the face of the building began to wilt and die within hours. I was standing looking at his handiwork and he said to me “do you think I did that”? He was a little nervous that he would get in some trouble - I told him to relax and not be worried ... then told him that it was totally his fault. Today Jesus uses this common sense image of a vine and branches to show us what happens when we try to live our lives apart from him. He says: *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.* You may say, “well I know some people who have cut Jesus out of their lives and they seem to be doing ok” - But let’s take a look at a few possible outcomes for the branch that can no longer take full nourishment from the main vine - they’re not so good off as they appear.

First there is the branch that is totally snapped off - it is headed to a waisting death. Some people are just slowly dying mentally and spiritually. You know them. They have despaired of the love of God, they have grown more and more bitter - they are even more miserable than they know. Sometimes angry, sometimes sad, disconnected from true loving relationships with others, they only fool themselves to say that things are going well. They do not give life to others around them, do not move to fulfillment by being a part of the life and action of God. Disconnected from the sap of God’s grace, they are like the dead ivy branch still gripping to the building. One day it will waste away completely and fall off.

Second are those whose branch has cracked, but not totally separated. Like the branch of a vine that has been pulled on and partly ripped away - it is not healthy. They do some things that are part of the life of God, they have a partial connection with the sap flowing from he vine that is Jesus - but they are wilted and unable to fully bear fruit. Jesus said today: *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.* These branches are partly on the vine, but they really are just barely alive in spirit

and do not have enough energy to bear good fruit. On a plant you might see this type of damaged branch that has leaves, but not the amount of foliage, flowers, and fruit of other more healthy limbs. The fruits of a life lived in Jesus - that fruit that gives life to others in the world are not being produced. Such a person is just getting barely enough energy to survive. Branches are meant to bear fruit - such a one as this is just waiting to be pruned away in the end.

Finally there is the branch that has removed itself and transplanted itself onto another plant. Often content with themselves - they may be rich in terms of money, possessions, success, pleasure - but they are drawing their energy from a plant other than Jesus. They have grafted themselves on to a weed. Weeds grow quickly, have lots of leaves, take over other plants, expend a lot of energy quickly - but they do not produce the life-giving fruit of the vine. They do not produce fruit that brings others to Jesus and to everlasting life, at best they make seeds that make more weeds - the kind of weeds that are spiritually choking our world. We can get upset that these branches are allowed to grow and prosper when they are not bearing Jesus' fruit. Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel that there is a time when things will be sorted out: *Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather up the weeds and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.* A lot of flashy growth and apparent health - only to loose out in eternity.

We are not meant to be one of these branches. We are meant to be the branches that draw energy from Jesus (as we do in our prayer and in the Eucharist), and to bear fruit that produces life and spreads more fruit-bearing plants, not choking weeds. Our second reading tells us of how to remain in Jesus: *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.* We are called by Jesus to remain in him, to be a church that is a living and fully growing vine. A vine, like the one I told you about that was trimmed without caring if the branches were connected to the main vine, has dead spots that are not only unattractive, but also do not grow up to the higher levels. We each have to assess what type of branch we are and graft ourselves back on the vine of Jesus if this is needed. We heard today of the effect of the early Church when it did this: *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.* That is an image of growth, that is an image of health, that is an image of branches growing out from the vine into the world to transform it and to reach up to the light of heaven to one day share in the life of that eternal garden Jesus has prepared for us.