

## **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER 2006/B**

It happens very often that, because of the complexity of human life and the fragility of our human nature, we fail in many ways in our commitments and pledges towards God and our fellow human beings. We realize how we repeatedly fall into the same mistakes and errors with little success of getting rid of them. At times, facing such a situation, we feel our heart broken; we are not only powerless, but also remorse and effects of the wrong done follow us throughout our life. It is such a situation St John is describing in the second reading.

For John, if our conscience condemns us, we know that God is greater than our conscience and that he knows everything. In other words, whenever we are conscious of having sinned, we may take confidence from our awareness of being "of the truth", which is God. The omniscient God who knows us far better than our own conscience is rich in mercy to forgive one who is truly his own. If, however, we are not conscious of having sinned, so much more will we be confident of God's favor.

As you can see, the aim St John pursues is, first of all, to keep the Christians from despair because of their sinful situation. Secondly, he wants them to rely on God and trust him in any matter happening in their lives, be it good or bad, and in spite of their sin. There is no question of letting Christians living in mediocrity, but of becoming better and better by relying on God's mercy and forgiveness. That is the reason why John also shows that the efficacy of prayer of the Christian depends on his fidelity to God, that is "keeping his commandments and doing what is pleasing in his sight".

The commandments are summed up in faith and in love of our brothers and sisters. Without keeping the commandments, there is no way of pleasing God; obedience to the commandments guarantees our continued communion with Him. Thereby, we testify to others that God is in us and we are in him, that his Spirit dwells in us. Then, we understand what John says in the beginning of his letter: "Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth". How can we love others or God without concrete acts?

The power of God's mercy we were talking about is shown in the first reading in the life of St Paul as he was forgiven his many mistakes by the Lord and brought to know Christ and his Gospel. The scene described in today's reading is all about what happened to him after his conversion and how he was integrated, thanks to the sponsorship of Barnabas, in the life of the Church by joining the group of the disciples. Through the journey of Paul to Jerusalem we learn this:

Although faith in Jesus Christ is a personal commitment of the individual towards God, it is from the outset a communitarian matter. We cannot be Christian and be content with living our faith privately. Faith engages us before the community of believers, our brothers and sisters with whom we share the same values of God's Kingdom. That is the reason why Paul travels to Jerusalem to show up himself before the apostles and give an account of his conversion. In other words, there cannot be separate faith from that professed by the whole Church. So it is strange to hear people say: "I believe in God but I do not join the Church; I pray in my house".

Second, Paul's step is a recognition of the authority of the Church symbolized by the leaders who are in Jerusalem. Even if the Lord has manifested himself to him in a personal way, Paul has understood that he belongs to the Church as a whole. Personal gifts and charisms received cannot be a reason to break the unity or to split the Church, or to contest the established leadership of those put in charge of the Church.

Finally, Paul's approach teaches us that in the Church we are complementary and not opponents. Each one has his story on how he came to know Jesus and to believe in him. Each one has his own charisms, but we are all at the service of the same Lord, Jesus Christ. Jealousy and competition should not be the lot of Christians or of the ministers in the Church.

We should not forget, however, that it is when a Church is well centered on Christ that it grows under the guidance and the consolation of the Holy Spirit. The same is true for the life of every Christian. As Jesus states in today's Gospel: "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. (...) Without me you can do nothing ". The point the Gospel is making is, first of all, about the importance of the relationship that links the Christian to Christ. A second point is about the community of life that Christ shares with his own. The last point is about the unavoidable truth that Christ is the source of all good works a Christian can do.

In this perspective, the image of the vine and branches means that the life of a Christian is essentially that of activity, and this consists in bearing fruit. However, there is a condition for that, namely to be united with Christ, like a branch which remains attached to the trunk of the tree in order to produce fruit. So, Jesus is the vine trunk and we, as Christians, are the branches. If we do not remain united with Christ, we will become dried up branches that can no longer produce fruit.

In other words, dried branches represent those among us who are Christians only by name, and all those whose names are still in the parish records, but who no longer live the teachings of Jesus' Gospel. When Jesus says that the dried branches will be thrown out and put into fire, he is warning us of the danger of remaining without life. He is also inviting us to strive to improve our relationship with him so that we come to produce abundant fruit. The reason for that is very simple: when we produce good and abundant fruit, the Father is glorified. Moreover, when we are truly and sincerely united with him, any prayer we present to the Lord is answered. May we come throughout this week to work on our relationship with Jesus! May God bless us in all our efforts to become better and better! May God bless you!



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