

Fifth Sunday of Easter B/2012

The readings of this fifth Sunday of Easter invite us to reflect on the flourishing of the life of Discipleship. They show us that in order to flourish we need to keep close contact with the Lord. However, such a contact would be difficult if, on our part, there is no desire to keep God's commandments and to put them into practice.

The first reading of the Acts of the Apostles recalls the aftermath of St Paul's conversion. At that time, as the disciples heard about Paul's conversion, they were all afraid because of what he once did to the Church. Thanks to the sponsorship of Barnabas and the grace of the Holy Spirit, they all came to welcome him and approved his ministry towards the gentiles.

What is behind this text is, first of all, the idea that the Church is a structured body. This idea is visible in the fact that although St Paul's conversion was individual, he felt that he had to go to Jerusalem in order to give an account of the change that had occurred in his life to the other disciples. Another idea is recognition of the fact that in the Church, we are all complementary. Therefore, even if the Lord can manifest himself to someone and give him gifts, that person is still a member of the Church as a whole and should work in communion with other members.

The last idea that appears in the text is about God's mercy and forgiveness. In fact, whatever might be our sins, God offers us always the possibility of conversion, as he did with St Paul. That is the reason why St John insists, in the second reading, that we trust God's bounty and forgiveness even where our conscience condemns us for not having kept God's commandments. After all, God is greater than our hearts and knows everything about us and he can forgive us.

All that helps us understand why Jesus invites us in the Gospel to remain in him, like a branch on the vine, so that we might bear more fruit. First of all, Jesus affirms that he is the true vine and his Father is the vine grower. In order for the vine to produce fruit, his Father takes away all unproductive branches and he prunes the productive ones so that they give more.

Then, Jesus compares his disciples to pruned branches because of the word he spoke to them. He invites them to remain in him as he remains in them so that they produce fruit, because without him they cannot do anything good. He finishes his speech by highlighting the consequences which unfold from remaining or not remaining in him.

Those who remain in him, indeed, will prosper and bear more fruit. And those who do not remain in him will wither and be thrown away like dried branches which are good only for fire. He concludes by saying that for anyone who remains in him and in whom his word remains, he can obtain everything he wants in his prayer. After all, his Father is glorified when his disciples bear much fruit.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first point I want to highlight is about the importance of keeping connection with Jesus. There is a fact we all know by experience, namely that if a branch of a tree is cut from a trunk, it will not live for a long time. Without being connected to the tree, the branch cannot receive the sap so necessary to its growth and vitality. It is only when a branch is linked to the trunk of the tree that it can prosper and produce fruit.

In the same way, it would be an illusion for any Christian to think that he can live on his own without contact with the Lord Jesus and produce fruit. It is like having a friend that we rarely visit, in whom we are less and less interested and with whom we keep no contact. In the end, our relationship will become rigid and estranged. That is exactly what can happen in our relationship with the Lord Jesus. In a positive way, it means that we need to keep contact with Jesus through the reading of his word in the Bible, an active participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and nourish our spirituality at the example of the saints. If we do not remain united with Jesus, we will dry up like branches that can no longer produce fruit.

A second thing I want to highlight is about the awareness of the importance of the community of believers we call the Church. As disciples of Jesus, we are not isolated entities, but rather members of a community of life which is the Church. This reality being recognized, it means that at a personal level, we really need to be united with Jesus in order to prosper. At the collective level, we really need to stay united with our brothers and sisters with whom we share the same faith in Jesus.

This demand is so important that St Paul, in spite of the privilege of having seen the Lord Jesus when he was on his way to Damascus, went to Jerusalem in order to meet the other apostles. That is why it would be a mistake to think that our faith deals only with Jesus and has nothing to do with the other members of the Church. Of course, individual faith is important as a witness of our believing in Jesus. But that belief in Jesus is evidenced when we join others who profess the same faith in the Church. In that sense, the Church gives to the individual a space where he lives his faith in Jesus.

Lastly, I want to propose a couple of practical ways which can help us remain united with Jesus. First of all, there is the participation in the Holy Mass. The Holy mass, indeed, remains at the center of the life of the Church as a place where we can easily commune with the Lord Jesus through the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. There is also the respect of God's commandments and the effort to live by the word of Jesus. In that perspective, the ultimate judge of our acts cannot be only our conscience. We have to listen to the word of God in any decision we want to make and examine seriously what he expects of us. In the same way, we have to put God's word into practice and not be content only of listening to it. All that would be impossible if we do not desire to change our lives and to conform them to what the Lord Jesus requires of us. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us remain in him and him in us. Let us accept the challenge of remaining in the Lord by living in the way that is worthy of him. May God bless you all!

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



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