

Fifth Sunday of Easter B2018

The readings of this fifth Sunday of Easter talk about the importance of union with God. They show us that our union with God cannot be effective if we live in isolation. They invite us to develop a type of relationship that makes Christ dwell in us and we in him.

The first reading of the Acts of the Apostles accounts the arrival of Saul in Jerusalem once he was converted. It shows all the fear the apostles had about him because of his past. It also shows how it was only when Barnabas sponsored him that the other disciples accepted him into their circle of life and appreciated his apostolate to the gentiles.

What is behind this text is the idea that the Church is a structured body whose cohesion gives strength to each of its members taken individually. Another idea is the truth that our union with God and Jesus, as beautiful as it might be, is not enough if it is not preceded by our relationship with our brothers and sisters. The last idea is the recognition of the truth that the conversion of heart is the necessary path that leads us to Jesus.

This text allows understanding of what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus declares that he is the vine and his disciples are the branches. First of all, the Gospel starts with the statement of Jesus saying that he is the vine, his Father the vine grower and the disciples the branches. Then, it goes on saying that every branch that does not bear fruit is taken away while that which produces fruit is pruned.

After that, the Gospel reports Jesus' affirmation that says that as a branch detached from the vine cannot bear fruit, so is anyone who does not remain in him. The Gospel ends with Jesus' assurance that if we remain in him, we can ask anything and we will receive it.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the importance of spiritual growth. What do I mean by that? Let me explain. In fact, it is striking to realize that in today's Gospel the words "remain in me" are used by Jesus almost five times and the verb "remain" is used eight times.

Positively, "remain in me" means dwell in me, stay in me, reside in me, be plugged into me like a device that functions thanks to a power supply. Negatively, it means "do not live your life outside of me", "do not keep your thoughts outside of me", "do not take your actions outside of me", "do not be guided by words and spirit other than mine".

The repetition of the word "remain in me" and of the verb "remain" seem to me a clear sign of Jesus' insistence that we stay in close contact with him if we really want to produce fruit. In that sense, the spiritual growth can be understood as a process of maturing in faith by being connected to Jesus in such a way that the whole of our life is enlightened, measured, nourished and guided by Jesus' words. It means also a process of becoming more and more like Jesus in our way of being, living, acting and approaching the world and God's creatures.

Such a vision means that any spiritual growth starts with the willingness to cultivate a close relationship with the Lord. I believe that is the reason why Jesus compares himself to the tree of the vine and the disciples to the branches which can never have life in them if they are detached from the trunk of the tree.

I believe Jesus is right and he joins us in our own experience of life. In fact, there is something we all know, namely that if a branch of a tree is cut from the trunk, it will not live for a long time. It is true, indeed, that without being connected to the tree, the branch cannot receive the sap so necessary to its growth and vitality. It is only when it is linked to the trunk of the tree that it can prosper and produce fruit.

That is what Jesus wants to tell us, namely that we have to be connected to him in order to be alive. 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 at all. In the end, our relationship will become estranged. That is what can happen to us when we are not connected to Jesus. If we do not remain in union with Jesus, we will dry up like branches.

The question that comes up here is this: How can we remain connected to Jesus? Here are a couple of things I think can help us being connected to Jesus. First of all, there is the participation in the Holy Mass. The Holy Mass, indeed, remains the center of the life of the Church as a place of communion with the Lord through the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. As Pope Francis says, the Mass is “where people receive Christ who saves, forgives and unites everyone to his father, to the church and to each other”. Moreover, the Mass is a gift left to us by the Lord so that “every authentic journey of faith, communion and witness springs from this sacrament of love”. Finally, “by celebrating the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, “we participate in the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ” until he comes again.

There is also the effort to live by the word of God in putting it into practice. In fact, the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the word of God we read and listen to by showing us the direction we can take for our life, the good we have to do and the bad we have to avoid. The word of God is not Man’s word. In it, God provides us with his light so that we walk in the right path that leads us to eternal salvation. Moreover, the word of God is a spiritual weapon that we can use in time of temptation as Jesus did. In that sense, the ultimate judge of our acts cannot be only our conscience, as enlightening as it might be. That is why we have to listen to the word of God before any decision we want to make and examine seriously what God wants us to do at any time.

Finally, there is the life of prayer. I read somewhere someone saying that prayer is a pipeline to God’s power and grace. Like a pipeline that brings water and gas to our home, prayer is a source of God’s blessing, comfort and healing. It allows us to be connected to the Lord and with the Lord.

Moreover, it is our means of communication with our heavenly Father. Just as communicating with our family or friends is important for our relationship, so it is for our relationship with God. And because it is important, it is imperative that we do it on a regular basis, not just when we have spare time or when it’s convenient, but at all times. Let us, then, pray that the Lord may help us to remain connected to him so that we produce more fruits. May God bless you all!

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

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