

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2 May 2021

Confirmation Masses:

St Stephen's Wolverhampton and Holy Trinity Ettingshall

Gospel

John 15.1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Homily

St John's gospel is regularly punctuated by a kind of canon fire, when Jesus suddenly claims some form of identity with the God who, early in the Exodus (3.14), reveals himself as 'I am who I am'. Beginning in His conversation with the woman at the well of Samaria in chapter 4 (26), when we hear his first such claim, 'I am He', thereafter we hear 'I am the bread of life' (ch 6.35), 'the light of the world' (8.12), 'the door to the sheepfold' and 'the good shepherd' (10.9; 11-14), 'the resurrection and the life' (11.25), 'the way the truth and the life' (14.6); and, finally, in this week's Gospel reading, 'I am the true vine' (15.1, 5). Jesus is picking up one of the richest and oldest metaphors in the whole of scripture about the relationship between God and His people: the vineyard owner and the vine.

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To begin with I want you to notice *three things* about *Jesus's* use of that image in this final 'I am' saying. First, notice that it is the only one of the sequence where God name's ('I am') is linked to something that is clearly and intentionally *corporate*. The Gospel makes this explicit, 'I am the vine, *you are the branches*'. In all the others Jesus speaks only of *himself*. You notice He doesn't say, 'I am the vinedresser, *you are the vine*.' No He is the *vine*, but a vine *cannot* exist without its branches – it certainly cannot be fruitful without them, and they cannot flourish without the central trunk which holds them all together, and roots them securely in the life of God?

Second, notice that this is the *final* such saying makes it the *goal* to which all the earlier revelations are pointing. Thus far Jesus has laid bare His unity with God, fed us with the bread of His word, shone as the light of truth, led us as a trustworthy guardian and guide, revealed the promise of resurrection, shown us the ultimate way of truth and life to the limit of sacrifice. All of this so that we may live a *shared life* with Him who, before His ascension, pledged 'I am *with you*, to the end of the age'.

And third, notice where and when it is that Jesus makes this claim: the scene of this teaching is in the final minutes of the Last Supper, during which He not only points *toward* His suffering and sacrificial death, but also points *beyond* His cross to the totally new kind of existence in the Spirit into which He will pass over after His resurrection. A new way of living is revealed by Jesus to be the goal and purpose of death and resurrection – the life together of the One and the many, the head and the body, the vine and the branches.

As the branches are joined to the vine, so you belong to me! But in so far as you belong to me, you *also* belong to one another. This not a metaphor, a poetic way of talking. A man – much less the son of God – doesn't offer himself to a brutal death in order to conjure up a consoling picture!! Nor is He describing an ideal, imaginary, symbolic relationship with the very people who are just about to abandon Him to death. He is describing the life-transmitting state of belonging that He and they (and in due course we) will share on the far side of the empty tomb and the ascension. 'I am the true vine; you are the branches' actually means: 'I am in you and you are in me' – an unprecedented identification of the Lord with His Church. The *same* sap – that is, the *same* strength and grace – that flowed through Him will flow through *them*, through *us*. That is what baptism and confirmation and communion means. We're not *copying* a life, *imitating* an example, working from a template. The life of the Christian is a *sharing in the same life* with the Lord and with one another.

But in case we get carried away with the beauty of the image, Jesus also told how there would be those who would outwardly be united to Him, profess their faith publicly, but would be inwardly disconnected from him, branches bearing no fruit. There would be yet other branches that were weak and in need of purification by cutting out dead-wood to make new shoots sprout. And so He speaks of His Father as a vine dresser, wielding a pruning knife.

It is impossible to imagine sharing life with Christ, which is not a sharing in the same charity and holiness. The same organism simply cannot have both the sap of *grace* and the sap of *sin* coursing through it! This vine is a *community* of self-less love purified by the Cross, and it is to bear the fruit of charity and holiness. And for this there *must be a pruning knife*, so that dead branches, weak growth, diseased foliage can be cut away.

For this we must, dear friends, live lives of prayer and repentance for sin: for our own sins, the sins of those who do not know they offend and wound God, for the sins and injustices of all mankind. Do you seriously imagine that you can come every week to Mass, never making anything more serious than a quick congregational confession of sin, and expect to be healthy fruit-bearing branches of the vine of charity and holiness? Really? Why should the vinedresser not reach for His knife? We need it! We need Him to cut out the withered branches, and prune the fruit-bearing ones so they bring forth more fruit.

'Abide in me' says Jesus: '*stick by me, learn to love and to do what I do. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me ... for separate from me, you can do nothing*' (Jn 15:4f). Saint Augustine says of these words: 'A branch is suitable for only one of two things, to be on the vine or on the fire: if it is not healthy on the vine, it will be unhealthy in the fire' (*In Ioan. Ev. Tract.* 81.3).

God has no desire to keep a person whose faith is withered, dead, fake or imitation. What's the point of keeping life that is dried up and withered? But there is a *great deal of reason* to prune and perfect what is fruitful and alive, to nurture life that is joyful and self-sacrificing.

Dear Brothers and Sisters! My hope for all of you is that you may discover ever more deeply the joy of being joined to Christ in the Church, that you may find strength to confess your sins, and know the truth of Jesus' words, 'A disciple is not above His teacher, but everyone when He is fully trained will be *like His teacher* – in every respect.' (Luke 6.40)