

Wine and Branches: Easter 5th Sunday '24

Today's first reading tells the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. After preaching there, Paul was forced to flee due to the danger to his life from the Jews. Instead of escaping to a safe, unknown place, he goes to the one place we probably wouldn't expect him to go - Jerusalem. Bcs, it was the place where neither the church nor the Jews would accept him. After the stoning of Stephen, Paul returned to Jerusalem and essentially continued the very work that Stephen had done in the promotion of the Gospel. When things were beginning to go out of hand, God sent Barnabas, (whose name means "*encourager*") to convince the disciples in Jerusalem that Saul indeed had a genuine conversion and was now, is one of them. Paul still faced opposition from the Hellenists. To protect Paul, the disciples helped him to get out of town and send him to Tarsus, his hometown.

St. Teresa of Avila once said: "God writes straight with twisted lines". Certainly, Saul was a very twisted line. For a moment, imagine being in the place of Saul after his encounter with Jesus at Damascus. Imagine, everything that you thought about your entire life, all your beliefs, everything that you held close to your heart, is taken away from you; and what is worse, you have no one to turn to. B&S, though our human lives often seem to be so full of weaknesses & mistakes, conflicts and confusions, God can achieve His purpose. The challenge we face in life are sometimes ways, God waking us up from slumber and strengthening our faith. If you ever felt like there is no way out, we have Saul to look up to. Perhaps, we cannot undo our mistakes, but there is no reason to let the mistakes define us. We can always bounce back. (Saul, who was the foremost persecutor, was also undeniably the most instrumental in the spread of the faith. If you are in the position of Saul, if you are a twisted line, don't worry. God can still write straight with you.)

Today's Gospel has the narrative of Jesus as the true vine.

There are two main themes in this narrative: The first is “*abiding in Jesus*”. (In the OT, Israel is frequently pictured as God’s vineyard, nurtured with perfect care, but only to yield bitter fruit. In the gospel, however, though the vine-grower is still God, the vine is not Israel, but Jesus) What does it mean to “abide in Jesus?” First, it signifies that *we cannot be one-man army in our lives*. No matter how skillful or talented we are, on our own, we cannot achieve much. It indicates loyalty or deep attachment to Jesus. The key to abide in Jesus is to keep the commandment of love. St. John talks of it in the 2nd reading today. (He tells us, ‘*Children, let’s love, not in word or speech, but in deed and truth*’.) We could be doing good works, but if those works are not motivated by Jesus’ message, then most likely, we are doing it for the wrong reasons. Therefore, it becomes imperative that we make God part of the decision-making process in our lives. When we receive H. Comm, Jesus comes to us and abides within us.

The second theme pertains to ‘*pruning*’ and ‘*bearing fruit*’. God is the vine-grower, who prunes and cleans the vine. This is to be understood in the context of a community. The branches to be pruned are the members of the community, and the bearing of fruit is the ‘*state of being disciples*’. There are two types of Christians: those producing fruit and those not producing. The unfruitful branches in the community are cut off and thrown away to be burnt.

Though pruning might seem harsh, it renews the vine’s vitality. No wonder that it is sometimes said that those who are closest to God, suffer more. In our lives, when we go through struggles and difficulties, even when we are not at fault, we should bring to our mind this imagery of pruning. Though difficult, pruning helps us bear more fruit. The imagery of vine reminds us of the abiding, lasting and permanent presence of Jesus in our lives. I do pray and wish that God write straight with the twisted lines that each one of us is. Amen.