

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

(Three sermons)

WE DEPEND ON JESUS AND OTHERS

Jn. 15:1-8

Most of us like to be independent. Teenagers are eager to take charge of their lives, several years before they have the necessary wisdom! As adults growing old, we dread the day we might lose our independence.

What we must realise is that, in fact, we are never totally independent. Our navel reminds us that we are not self-made individuals! Our very life was the gift of our mother and father. We were once physically attached to our mothers, utterly dependent on her for our blood supply, food and protection. Even when the umbilical cord was cut, we had to be fed, washed, clothed and carried. A little thought will show how dependant we are, throughout our lives, on many people.

In today's Gospel Jesus said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever remains in Me, with Me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from Me you can do nothing." In other words, you and I are like branches on a grapevine. Our lives are not self-contained. They depend on a source beyond ourselves. As long as we are connected to that source, we live. The moment we are disconnected, we die.

That is certainly true in a physical sense. The energy we need to live comes from air, light, food and water. Cut off from these we would be dead in moments. Jesus, however, was not talking about physical life. His primary concern was our spiritual wellbeing for which, again, we are dependent for its quality on something that comes from beyond ourselves.

God's power sustains us, even if we are not aware of His presence. Just as food renews our strength, even when asleep, so Christ gives us help, even when we are not thinking of Him. There are times in the past when we could have sinned and made some really stupid mistakes, but something held us back. Deep inside there was a persistent voice telling us to do the right thing. Where was Christ at that moment? Was He back there in history or up in Heaven? No! He was telling us to do what was right. Today Jesus is telling us that He lives in us and we can live in Him. He is the Vine and we are the branches.

There is even more to be learnt from this truth. The branches of a grapevine are not individual and isolated - they are all intertwined. They grow together and draw their life from the vine and from each other. So, it is with you and me. In the same sense that we are dependent on Christ, we are also dependent on each other. I need you, and you need me. When my faith in the invisible Christ is weak, let me fall back on you. I can see you, hear you and touch you. Sometimes my faith needs that kind of support.

A little girl once said, 'I know God loves me, but I want someone with skin to love me too.' Jesus Himself felt like that when, that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, He begged Peter, James and John to stand by Him. He knew His Father was with Him, of course, but

He wanted someone with skin to care about Him too. That is what friends are ... love with a skin!

I am sure that there is someone reading this today who is feeling alone. That is a very human experience. But remember that you are never alone - God is with you.

Lord Jesus, Your presence sometimes can be hard to perceive. That is why we need other people to play their part, as the branches of the grapevine intertwined with us. Help us to recognise our dependence on You Who will enable us to find someone on whom we can rely.

OUR COMMUNION WITH CHRIST AND ONE ANOTHER

Acts.9:26-31; 1 Jn. 3:18-24 & Jn. 15:1-8

In describing Himself as the vine and us as its branches, Our Lord has given us a beautiful image of the communion that exists in the Church. By communion, we mean an intimate sharing of life between Our Lord and each one of us, and between one another. The grapes on the branches symbolize the good works that we perform and our life of virtue. The essence of Our Lord's teaching is that just as the branch must remain a part of the vine in order to bear fruit, so also do we have to be in communion with Him if we are to lead a virtuous life. Notice the rich variety of expressions Our Lord uses to describe this communion with Him: "Remain in Me." "Make your home in Me." >From the analogy of the vine and its branch, what are the necessary conditions if we are to have communion with Christ?

Firstly, belief in Jesus as Saviour. For a branch to bear fruit, it must at least be physically joined to the vine. If it is physically cut off and is lying by itself, then it is finished. This physical attachment of the vine to the branch corresponds to our faith in Jesus, and this constitutes a visible bond of communion, which is the minimum requirement. Without this faith, communion with Him cannot even begin. As we heard in the second reading, St. John tells us that the first condition for remaining in God, is that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ. This involves not just believing in the person of Jesus, but also accepting the totality of truth which He entrusted to the Apostles, and which has been safeguarded, developed and handed down through the centuries by the teaching authority. It is by our faith that we become joined to the Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, just as the branch is joined to the vine. Profession of the entire body of Catholic faith, participation in the Sacraments, and submission to the governing authority of the Church, together constitute what we call the visible bond of communion.

Secondly, love for one another. Although a branch may be physically attached to the vine, it may still be a dead branch, with no life in it. In the same way, it is not enough that we simply have faith; we should also express this faith by works of love. To love is to live, and faith without love is dead. In the extreme case of a person who is in mortal sin, he is totally dead, and even though he may believe in Jesus and profess the entirety of the Catholic faith, yet spiritually he is as dead as a completely lifeless branch. Love, therefore, is the second requirement for being in communion with Jesus. Again St. John, in the second reading made this point very clear. God's commandments are that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus and that we love one another. This love, he says, must be genuine and not mere

talk. This state of remaining in love for God and neighbour is what constitutes the invisible bond of communion.

Thirdly, pruning of our spiritual life. A third requirement for a good vine is that even the healthy branches should be pruned regularly. Every branch, however healthy and prolific, will have some parts which are diseased or dead. The purpose of pruning is to remove these lifeless parts, so that the sap of the vine may be more efficiently shared by the living parts of the branch. Similarly, each of us, in our spiritual lives, will find that there is a mixture of good fruit and dead wood. Some parts of our lives are affected by sin which, even though not necessarily serious, is sufficient to impede our growth in communion. This is where a regular examination of conscience helps us to identify the “dead” areas of our life by comparing our life against the standards of the Gospel. The word of God thus helps us to show up the areas that need pruning, and once these have been identified, they should be pruned by the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Lord Jesus, each of us is a branch of the vine connected to You. Let us strive to preserve and enrich this branch in a healthy, fruit bearing condition, by our faith, by our works of love, by regular pruning by the word of God and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

ENCOURAGERS NEEDED

Acts 9:26-31; Jn. 15:1-8

I have often wondered how people in the past got their names. We were given our first names by our parents and we inherited our last names from our fathers, just as they did from their fathers. There was a time when most people had only one name. One name was enough as communities were smaller. If two people ended up with the same name, then it was necessary to distinguish between them. John the farmer became John Farmer and John the blacksmith became John Smith. Thus, family names and last names began to appear.

Of equal fascination is the origin of nicknames. These are given by family, or friends, or foes to describe some outstanding characteristics of a particular person. This was a common practice in the Bible. We read this morning about a man in the early church, who was called Barnabas. His real name was Joseph, but his friends named him Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement”. He was that kind of man. Whenever people faltered or failed, were ignored or rejected, Barnabas would seek them out and encourage them.

He did that for a new convert to the Christian cause, whom we know as Paul. It seems strange to us now, but Paul had a hard time finding acceptance within the Church. They were afraid of him, and for good reason. His original name was Saul. Among all the enemies of the Christian cause, Saul was probably the most fierce and fanatical. Eventually he was converted and became a follower of Christ, but his prior reputation was not easy to shake off. When he came to Jerusalem and tried to join the Christians there, they were not welcoming. They simply could not believe that this man was truly one of them. In that critical moment, it was Barnabas who came to the rescue. He took Paul by the hand and led him into the fellowship of the Church.

Aren't we glad Barnabas befriended Paul? Whenever we read one of the many letters that Paul wrote, we should credit Barnabas for this. I wonder how many Barnabases we have in our Church – people who know how to encourage other people in their Catholic faith. We need them. The problem in the Church today is not exactly the same as it was in Paul's time. We are not inclined to freeze people out of our fellowship because we fear them. Our tendency is to lose people from Church, because we forget them. They simply drop by the wayside. We miss them for a few weeks. We wonder about them occasionally, but after a while the saying "out of sight, out of mind" takes over, and the drop-outs are quietly forgotten. In this way more than any other, people are lost to the cause of Christ and His Church.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus drew an interesting analogy. He compared Himself and the members in His Church to a grapevine, "I am the vine, and you are the branches." We are all tied together, sharing one common source of life. As long as the branches stay connected to the vine, they grow grapes and produce a harvest. When some branches somehow get disconnected; they drop to the ground and just lie there. Their contribution to the over-all purpose of the vine is lost.

How do the branches get disconnected in the first place? Obviously, a branch doesn't deliberately decide to break away from the vine. Here the analogy is incomplete. Branches can't do that, but people can. Very few people just make up their minds one day to turn their backs and walk away from the Church. The disconnectedness, the disassociation usually takes place by some more subtle process than that. Some people get lost simply through moving residence. The previous parish and familiar faces are left behind. For a while, there is a sense of freedom in that new location. Community responsibilities and social obligations are reduced to a minimum. No one from the Church ever calls to say, "We missed you these last few Sundays." No one was expecting them.

There can be a kind of comfort in that feeling of privacy. Anonymity has its advantages. Within limits, you can be what you want to be and do what you want to do. But it also has its disadvantages. We all have a need to belong. So, one day, driven by perhaps loneliness and a lack of belonging, this displaced person, a disconnected branch goes to another Church. They go hoping for, if not expecting, the same friendliness that they had known in their old Church, but it's not there. The architecture is different. The preaching is different. The music is different. And worst of all the faces and voices are different. Some of them try to establish new relationships, but after a time getting no response, they give up, drop out, and are lost to the cause of Christ and His Church. Is there more loneliness and social detachment in our world today than ever before?

Where is Barnabas? We are aware of the shortage of priests in the Church, but if we had a full staff of priests in every parish, they alone could not do the job of keeping in touch with the strays. We still need Barnabases, those warm-hearted men and women who will take lonely people by the hand and lead them back into the fellowship of the Church.

There is another kind of disconnected branch that I have seen. It is the people who fall by the wayside due to lost faith and changed attitudes. In the past they were fervent Catholics, but not anymore. The things that have happened to them, or the lives they have lived, have robbed them of their faith. Such people need and deserve our understanding. To build a

strong faith and hold on to it, through all the changing fortunes of life, is not an easy thing to do.

What, if anything, can the Church do about these kinds of disconnected branches? How can you get people to believe what they don't believe? How do you get them to care about their faith when they don't care? One thing is sure – we will never do it by beating them over the head with the Bible. Not many people are shamed into the faith. Fewer still are frightened into it. Most people are drawn into it by someone who truly cares about them and that is where Barnabas enters the scene. What the Church needs today is an army of Barnabases. There is a Gospel song that says,

“Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,

Feelings lie buried that grace can restore,

Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness,

Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.”

Are you prepared to be a Barnabas