

5th Sunday of Easter – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Acts 9:26-31

Our first reading today has Saul (Paul) as the hero. The time is about A.D. 36-39. He has been struck down on the road to Damascus and blinded, led into Damascus and for three days was without sight, food and drink. Healed by Ananias and baptized (the only baptism of any apostle in Holy Scripture), then he preaches about Jesus in the synagogues in the area for many days (three years according to Galatians 1:17-18) until the Jews plotted to kill him causing him to flee to Jerusalem.

26 When he [Saul] arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

After three years of preaching? It could be that they feared a “loose cannon” as he had not accompanied Jesus and was a Jewish theologian of some note.

27 Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles,

Acts 4:36 tells us that Barnabas (whose name means “son of encouragement”) who had been named Joseph, was a Levite from Cyprus who sold a field and gave the money to the apostles. He was a cousin of Mark. Perhaps the apostles did not know of Saul’s work in Damascus but at any rate he is befriended by Barnabas.

and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

Even though Saul had been a Pharisee while Jesus was preaching, and indeed for three years after His sacrifice on the altar of the cross, he has received a personal commission from Our Lord.

28 He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists,

The Hellenists. This group of Jews were fierce Mosaic loyalists who were quick to defend their traditions.

but they tried to kill him.

Just like in Damascus, Saul has to flee for his life.

30 And when the brothers learned of this,

The members of the Christian community are a brotherhood and the mutual address of “brother” is used 28 times in the Acts of the Apostles.

they took him down to Caesarea

On the coast of Palestine south of Mount Carmel. Built by Herod the Great and named after Caesar Augustus (it is shown on some maps as Caesarea Maritima).

and sent him on his way to Tarsus.

Near the coast of Cilicia. They may have been afraid that he would be martyred like Stephen.

31 The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the holy Spirit it grew in numbers.

Not necessarily because of Saul’s change in career. Various communities have grown up as a result of the Christians’ flight from Jerusalem. This note of justified optimism and trust in God confirms that God is with His Church and no human force can destroy it.

2nd Reading - 1 John 3:18-24

Last week we heard about the marvelous gift of divine filiation. Because of this gift we can call ourselves “children of God.” Today we hear about living out this divine filiation to the fullest – by expressing our brotherly love in word and deed.

18 Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

How we live the life of charity is an indication, not only to others but to ourselves as well, of our Christian commitment.

“It is not enough to have good intentions. You must also put them into effect with genuine willingness and a happy heart.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 388), *Catena*]

19 (Now) this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth

Jesus is the truth, the way, and the life. If we are committed to the truth, we are committed to God.

and reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.

The omniscient God who knows us far better than our own conscience is rich in mercy to forgive one who is truly His own.

²¹ Beloved, if (our) hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God ²² and receive from him whatever we ask,

If we are not conscious of having sinned, so much the more will we be confident of God's favor.

because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

If we are keeping His commandments, we are doing what is pleasing in His sight.

"Our conscience gives us a true answer, that we love and that genuine love is in us, not feigned but sincere, seeking our brother's salvation and expecting nothing from him except his salvation." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 416), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Parthians* 6,4]

²³ And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,

In Semitic usage, "name" is equivalent to the person. Faith is not simply the acceptance of a proposition, but a commitment to a person. Jewish practice was to call Yahweh "the Name" and this has been carried over into Christian references to Christ.

and love one another just as he commanded us. ²⁴ Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.

Obedience to the commandments guarantees continued communion with God. A further guarantee of the divine presence is the possession of the Holy Spirit.

Gospel - John 15:1-8

Today we hear Jesus say that He is the true vine and we are the branches. The comparison of the chosen people with a vine was used in the Old Testament: Psalm 80 speaks of the uprooting of the vine in Egypt and its replanting in another land; and in Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7) God complains that despite the care and love he has lavished on it, His vineyard has yielded only wild grapes. Here, the comparison has a different, more personal meaning: Christ explains that He Himself is the true vine, because

the old vine, the original chosen people, has been succeeded by the new vine, the Church, whose head is Christ. To be fruitful one must be joined to the new, true vine, Christ: it is no longer a matter of simply belonging to a community but of living the life of Christ, the life of grace, which the nourishment that passes life on to the believer and enables him to yield fruits of eternal life.

15:1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

Whatever figure Jesus uses to express His saving work, He characterizes Himself as the instrument of the Father.

2 He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

Old Testament traditions spoke of pruning fruitless vines (Jeremiah 5:10; Ezekiel 17:7). The branches of the vine are Jesus’ disciples: if they remain fruitless the Father will remove them; in turn, it is by His power that they can produce fruit. Even the fruitful are trimmed – no one escapes suffering.

3 You are already pruned

The disciples are not in danger of being pruned.

because of the word that I spoke to you.

The “word” is not *logos*, but the whole of His revelation of God, which is a message of eternal life.

4 Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. 6 Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned.

The community of life shared with Christ is the condition of the Christian’s bearing fruit, his pleasing God. The one who breaks this unity is like a dead branch, fit only to be cast into the fire. Even those who once bore fruit but are now barren are at risk. There is no once saved, always saved.

7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.

The Christian who remains an active part of the community, doing what is right in God’s

eyes (which benefits the community as well as the individual).

⁸ By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

The Father is glorified in the works of the Son's disciples.

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