

## **The Fifth Sunday of Easter**

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 9:26-31
<i>Response</i>	I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 3:18-24
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Remain in me as I remain in you, says the Lord. Whoever remains in me will bear much fruit.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 15:1-8

The Fifth Sunday of Easter continues our journey through the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John. As I pointed out in earlier videos, during the Easter season the church will frequently give us teachings from John's gospel in particular. So last week we looked at Jesus' good shepherd discourse in the temple in Jerusalem, now we're looking at a section from his Last Supper discourse, which is unique to the Gospel of John. One of the distinctive aspects of John's gospel is that although it doesn't contain the words of institution of the Eucharist, this my body this my blood, he does give us a lengthy account of other things that Jesus said to the disciples at the Last Supper. It is commonly called the farewell discourse, we can find this material in John 14, 15, 16 and 17. So the church will frequently read from that farewell discourse, or Last Supper discourse, during the Easter season. And, today's reading is taken from that Last Supper discourse and it's Jesus' famous analogy of the vine and the branches. So let's read through that together and we'll try to unpack it and link it with the other readings for today.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. 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. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and

withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so let's stop there; there's so much going on in the passage, we could do a whole video just on these verses, but let me just highlight a few elements for you here that are important to highlight. Number one, the context, I know I said it already but I'm going to stress it again, Jesus is making this analogy of vine and branches not just any time during his public ministry, he's doing it at the Last Supper. And, the reason that is important, well one reason that is important, is because during the Last Supper, we know from the Synoptics, he actually took a chalice of wine and said, "this is my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant." So in that context of having instituted the Eucharist, which involves bread and wine, it's not inconsequential that he's going to compare himself to a grapevine, right. So this isn't just any kind of vine, this is a grapevine, which was one of the staples of ancient Israelite agriculture, so it would have been well known. So the context here is, first and foremost, it's sacramental right. So when Jesus starts to talk about a vine and fruit, which would be a grape vine and grapes, the context, the immediate context, is his just having identified a chalice with the fruit of the grape, or the blood of the grape as the Bible calls it, with his own blood. So that Eucharistic context needs to be kept in mind, that's the first thing.

The second thing is the broader Jewish context of this analogy of the vine and the branches. Jesus did this during Passover, that's when he instituted the Last Supper. And during Passover, the Jews would pilgrimage, not just into the city of Jerusalem, but they also had to go into the temple and offer sacrifice, the sacrifice of a lamb. I go through this in the book on the Jewish roots of the Eucharist in a lot more detail. But one of the things I didn't mention in that book, at least I don't think I did, was that in the temple over the archway leading into the temple, there was a very visible decoration. There was a very visible sacred image, and that was a golden vine. It was surrounding the archway leading into the temple. And Jose-

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

phus, the First century Jewish historian who was also a priest in the temple before it was destroyed, actually gives us a description of this golden vine that was above the entryway into the temple. And this is what he says:

The holy temple.... was covered with gold, and through it the first edifice was visible to a spectator without in all its grandeur and the surroundings of the inner gate all gleaming with gold fell beneath his eye... It had, moreover, above it those *golden vines, from which depended grape clusters as tall as a man...*<sup>2</sup>

That's Josephus' book *The Jewish War*, book five, paragraph 207-211. So notice, if you were a Jewish pilgrim like the disciples going into the temple on Passover in order to offer your lamb, as you pass through the entryway, one of the most visible things you'd see was this giant grapevine covered in pure gold, with clusters of grapes as big as a man, right. Which, by the way, is an allusion to the book of Joshua, when the Israelites went to the promised land and they saw the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, carrying clusters of grapes as big as a man. In other words, it was a land flowing with milk and honey. It was a land of super abundant produce, right. It was a fruitful and blessed land. So the temple here is like a little icon of the holy land, it's like a little icon of the promised land. And so a vine and its branches is something every Jew would have associated with the temple. So in that context of Passover and Last Supper, when Jesus says I am the true vine, implicit in that adjective is a comparison with the earthly temple in Jerusalem and with the golden vine of the Jerusalem temple, right. So what he's describing is himself as the true vine of the true temple. It's just one more instance of Jesus identifying himself as the dwelling place of God on Earth and as the one whose very body was going to replace the new temple, okay.

So with that in mind, keep going with the analogy. Jesus is saying he is the vine, his Father is the vine dresser, and his disciples are the branches off of the vine, which are supposed to bear fruit, right. Because that's why you plant a grapevine, you want it to bear fruit, you want it to make clusters of grapes. And Jesus takes this analogy and he runs with it, it's really fascinating here to look at the different kinds of branches. So he describes here two different kinds of branches on this

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<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *War* 5:207-211; trans. LCL

grapevine that he himself is. First there are the fruitless branches and then there are the fruitful branches. Let's look at each one. First, with regard to the fruitless branches, he says those who do not bear fruit, right, two things happen to them. First, they are cut off from Christ. It says here that the vine dresser takes them away because they do not abide in him. Second, they are burned. He says the branches are cut off and then they are thrown into the fire. Now you don't have to be a biblical scholar to figure out what this symbol means, because whenever Jesus uses the imagery of fire in the gospels, he's frequently doing it with reference to the fire of Gehenna, to the place of the damned, right. So he's saying on the one hand if you are a member of his body, if you're a branch and you're part of the vine, if you're one of his disciples, but you don't keep his word, you don't obey his commandments, you don't actually bear fruit, then God, the vine dresser, the Father, is going to do to you what any vine dresser would do to a branch that's not bearing fruit. He's going to cut it off and throw it into the fire, right. So if you've ever gardened or tried to grow trees in an orchard, you know what this is like. For example, in my yard I have some Satsuma trees, it's a citrus tree that grows here in Louisiana, very fruitfully. Well especially after the winter comes there's certain branches that are just dead, right, or if you've got a certain branch that isn't bearing any fruit, then you're not just going to leave that branch on the tree because it's going to sap the life out of the other branches, it can have a negative effect on the entire tree. So if a branch isn't bearing any fruit, what you do? You cut it off and once you cut it off you don't keep it, right, because it's dead, it's no longer part of the tree. You're going to take it and you're just going to dispose of it, or as Jesus says, it'll be thrown into the fire. So Jesus is using that as an image for disciples who don't keep his commandments, for disciples who don't remain in him and who don't bear fruit. Ultimately they'll be cut off and they'll be thrown into the fire.

By contrast, there are the fruitful branches. Now notice what he says about the fruitful branches. In verse two he says every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit, right. Now that's important. What does pruning mean? How can the Father prune us? Well again if a person is gardening or working with a tree in an orchard, sometimes a branch will bear fruit but in order to get it to bear more fruit you will cut off some of the excess, you'll prune it, right. Anything that's not actually necessary you cut off and it gives more of the sap to the fruit, so that it is able to bear more fruit. So these excess elements are cut off so that the fruit can

be more plentiful. Another aspect of this branch is that it abides in the vine, it abides in the main vine, and that apart from that main vine it can't do anything. Again this is obvious if you've ever gardened. Let's say you're pruning your tree and you accidentally cut off a branch that was in fact good. It wasn't dry, it was fine, it was bearing fruit, but you make a mistake, and I've done this before, you know, slip of the clippers and boom, there it goes. Well once that branch is cut off from the vine guess what, it's not going to bear any fruit, it's going to die, right. Because apart from the vine, apart from the trunk, it can't bear any fruit. Everything it has, all the life that it produces, all the fruit that it produces, comes from the vine itself.

So what Jesus is trying to do here is teach the disciples the principle, the necessity, of remaining in him, of abiding in him. If he is truly the vine and they are the branches, that any fruit that they bear really isn't going to be from them. It's going to be from him and from the Father that will prune them, so that they can bear more fruit. So this is a beautiful image here of the life of Christian discipleship and also of apostolic activity, of evangelization, of bearing fruit for the nature of the kingdom. Jesus basically gives us the essential principle for any kind of apostolic work or evangelization, and that's this, unless you abide in me you can't do anything, you can't bear any fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing he says. And I think that's a really important principle for anyone who is engaged in work in the church. Whether it be some kind of ministry, some form of evangelization, whether it be catechism, or CCD, or confirmation prep, whatever it is, you teach in a Catholic school, whatever apostolic activity you might do, it's critical to realize that unless you do it in Christ it will not bear any fruit for the kingdom of God. Apart from him, you can do as much as a branch cut off of the tree can do, which is nothing. I think this is important to emphasize because I know from my own experience sometimes I can be tempted to think, well apart from Christ I can do some things well but with Christ I can do even better. That's not what Jesus says. He doesn't say apart from me you can do some things and you need me to kind of beef it up. What he says is apart from me you can do nothing, because the work of the vine dresser and the work of the vine is supernatural. He's talking about evangelization, he's talking about the spread of the kingdom of God, which is essentially supernatural in character.

Now you might be asking, well hold on Dr. Pitre, what exactly does all that mean? How do I abide in him? How am I pruned by the Father? How can I bear much fruit? Well look at what he says here, a couple of things. Verse three, you were already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. So the first aspect of abiding in the vine is to let his word remain in us, to let his word purify us, to let his word prune us of any of the excess things that would take away from the work that God wants to do in us, right. So in other words, reading the word of God, meditating on the words of Christ, is a way that the Father prunes us of all the excess things in our life that can get in the way of what Christ wants to do in our hearts, right, and through our lives, and through our ministry, through apostolic activity, through our family life, through our evangelization; whatever it looks like according to our state in life. The second element here is just the image of abiding in the vine. How do I, Jesus says in verse four, “abide in me and I in you”? Well how do I abide in the vine? Well it’s not just the word of Christ, it’s also the sacraments. Staying in touch with, staying deeply entrenched in the sacramental life of the church, above all the Eucharist. Alright, think about this for just a minute. If he’s comparing himself to a vine in the context of the Last Supper and it’s a grape vine, right, from which you make wine, then how might I abide in the grapevine that is Christ? Well to receive his precious blood in the holy Eucharist, to abide in the sacrament by which the vine, who is Christ, gives us his very blood which of course is the Eucharist, right. It’s, in other words, it’s the lifeblood of any supernatural activity I engage in, both metaphorically and literally, right. It really is what bears fruit in me.

And then finally, another element there, and this is a little more sobering but it’s absolutely essential for us to stress here, which is avoiding sin, avoiding sin. Avoiding the kind of sin that would cut us off from Christ, right. And Jesus says here in verse six, “if a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.” Okay, so how could we not abide in Christ? Well one way would be to commit a mortal sin, to live a life of sin, because sin is nothing other than separation from God. It is doing something that separates us from God or from our neighbor by failing to love God and failing to love our neighbor. And so here what Jesus is doing is he’s saying if you don’t remain in me, in other words, if you cut yourself off from my word or if you cut yourself off from the life of my sacraments, guess what’s gonna happen?

You're going to dry up just like that branch, and once you're spiritually dead like that branch, once you're cut off from the vine and are spiritually dead, there's nothing left for you except to be thrown into the fire and burned. So this is one of the most sobering images for the eternal separation from God that the church defines as hell, right. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the church actually says that the principal punishments, so to speak, or the principal suffering of hell is the pain of separation from God. Jesus uses a very vivid image of that separation here, the image of a branch being cut off from the vine and thrown into a fire.

With that in mind I might add here, and I think this is very important, that in my experience too, this is also the best text to show the falsehood of the doctrine that's very prominent among many Christians these days of once saved, always saved. You may have heard of this particular doctrine. You've probably run into it before. Sometimes it can be described as the doctrine of absolute assurance of salvation and it's held by many non-Catholic Christians who will actually say not only should you be assured of your salvation in an absolute sense, but they'll frequently ask you, you know, if you died tonight are you absolutely certain that you'd go to heaven? And you know, that kind of puts a Catholic on the spot. Well wait, what do you mean if I died tonight, am I absolutely certain? Well I don't know, I'm not sure, that's in God's hands, he's the one who judges us. And so sometimes there are many Christians who will say that unless you believe you're absolutely saved and that it's impossible for you to lose your salvation, then you're not actually saved. It's a pretty widespread and really pernicious doctrine, and it's impossible to reconcile that with this text because what Jesus is clearly describing here is someone who has become a disciple, right, they are a branch, they're part of the vine but who doesn't abide in Christ, who doesn't remain in Christ. And so through some sin or some failure to remain in his word and to remain in the sacramental life of the church, they do not any longer abide in him, they choose not to remain in him. And so they, in a sense, cut themselves off from the very source of life through sin, through what we would call a mortal sin. What's the fate of that person? Well Jesus is saying here if you don't abide in me, you're going to be cut off and thrown into the fire, which is obviously an image for the fires of hell.

So I bring this up because I think this is really important for Catholics to realize, that the doctrine of once saved always saved is an un-biblical teaching. It is con-

trary to the teaching of Scripture, and not just this Scripture, many other Scriptures, but it's particularly contradictory to our Lord's teaching in John 15. Jesus makes it very clear here that a person can be grafted into the vine, in other words, you can be part of the body of Christ, but you can cut yourself off, right, you can fail to remain by failing to remain in his word and by failing to bear fruit. So we have an obligation, to put it in the language of St. Paul, not just to have faith which grafted us into the vine but also to do good works, to bear fruit, because if the Father comes and sees that this branch is not bearing any fruit, guess what he's going to do? He's going to cut off that branch and cast it into the fire. Okay, so as Jesus says at the end of the passage, "by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." So notice that, Jesus doesn't expect just apostles or bishops or priests to bear fruit; he expects all of his disciples not just to remain in him but to bear much fruit. He has the power through his grace to do that in us and our job is to remain in him so that he can work that work in us.

Okay, well obviously there was lots to say about that and I could go on and on and on. It's one of my favorite passages in the Bible, but I think that will suffice to give you a sense of how important this image of the vine and the branches is. For now let's turn to the first reading, we want to look also at the Acts of the Apostles 9:26-31. And in this case, as I mentioned before in earlier videos, the church gives us a little window on the spread of the gospel in the first decades of Christianity. Last week we looked at Peter preaching before the leaders of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. This week we look at St. Paul in his early efforts at evangelization in the city of Jerusalem, shortly after his conversion. So let's just again put this, it's a short reading, but let's put it in context here.

So the reading begins in Acts 9:26, but the previous verses in that chapter are a description of Paul's famous encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, when Jesus appears to Paul, asks him Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me, and Paul responds ultimately by converting and being baptized and beginning to believe in Jesus as both Messiah and Lord. And so what happens is, once Paul leaves Damascus and comes to Jerusalem, he begins to proclaim the good news and immediately meets with some opposition, because the same Jewish leaders who had imprisoned Peter and arrested the disciples now begin plotting to kill Paul for preaching the gospel. In fact, they're even more angry at Paul because whereas Pe-



ter and the other disciples were from Galilee, you know they were from a different part of the country, they were Northerners, they were fishermen, Paul was one of their own. Paul was the star student of Rabbi Gamaliel, he was one of the teachers in Jerusalem. He was one of the principal opponents of the early church who participated in the martyrdom of St. Stephen. So once Paul converts and begins preaching the gospel, now the Jerusalem leaders have an even bigger problem than with Peter and the others because it's one thing for some uneducated, fishermen from Galilee, along with a tax collector, who you know, you can't trust any further than you can throw them... It's one thing for some fishermen and some tax collectors to preach that Jesus is the Messiah, it's another thing for someone like Paul, who was lettered, who was learned, who was a member of the Jerusalem Academy, who had studied with the Pharisees and the scribes and who knew the Scriptures, and who was a learned and respected man, it's another thing for him to begin proclaiming, yes, Jesus has in fact fulfilled the Hebrew prophets. Yes, Jesus of Nazareth was in fact not just the Messiah, but the Lord. And so that's the context of this reading for today, the first reading ,Acts 9:26. It begins as follows:

And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesare'a, and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Sama'ria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.

Okay, so why does the church give us that episode for today's reading? I think there are two reasons. First, Peter and Paul are two of the chief figures in the Acts of the Apostles and we're reading through Acts right now in the Easter season. Although it's called Acts of the Apostles, you don't really hear that much about the other 12, right. You don't hear much about Andrew and James and John and Thaddeus and the other members of the 12. The two principal actors in the Acts of the

Apostles are Peter, to whom the first half of the book is devoted, and Paul, to whom the second half of the book is devoted. So you could have actually entitled this book the Acts of Peter and Paul. So the church gave us last week some of Peter's first preaching in Jerusalem and this week it gives us an account, a short account, of some of Paul's first preaching in the city of Jerusalem, which frankly wasn't all that successful because their basic response to his preaching was not conversion but opposition, they tried to kill Paul.

And in particular, you'll notice it says that he came in to strife with a group called the Hellenists. Who were the Hellenists? Well there is some debate about this in contemporary scholarship, but the majority opinion is that the Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews living in the city of Jerusalem. So you may recall elsewhere in the Book of Acts, a dispute broke out between the Hebrews and the Hellenists. These were Hebrew speaking Christians and Greek speaking Christians who were somewhat divided amongst one another in the early church, some of those divisions persisted. And so most scholars think that when it says Hellenists, it's speaking not about pagans, not about Greek speaking pagans living in Jerusalem, but about Greek speaking Jews, who would've been particularly offended by Paul, because remember Paul spoke Greek, so he himself, in a sense, was a Hellenist. But the Hellenists frequently were also the more educated and some of the more elite amongst the city of Jerusalem. So they probably would've seen Paul as one of their own, someone who had basically apostatized from their pharisaic ways and their Jewish ways to embrace this new sect of the Nazarenes, and to begin preaching in favor of the very Jesus that he had formally persecuted. So they probably saw Paul as a turncoat, in other words, which would've made him an even more dangerous figure in some ways than Peter or James or John. So we see Paul, despite this opposition though, the church is spreading. It's spreading throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and the conversions to Christianity are multiplying.

So again, I would just stress that this shows us that Acts of the Apostles is giving us the truth about the spread of the gospel. Although Christians today will sometimes assume that all of the Jews rejected the gospel and all of the Gentiles accepted it, that's just not true. The Acts of the Apostle shows very clearly that Christianity, first and foremost, spread as a Jewish movement within Judaism in both Judea and Samaria as well as Galilee in the north, before it begins branching out to the

nations, before it begins branching out to the Gentiles, which is precisely what's going to happen in the weeks to come. In the Sundays to come we'll see this in some of the next readings. The gospel is going to spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and then to the ends of the Earth.

And that in fact is the theme of the Psalm for today. So if you look at the Responsorial Psalm, its Psalm 22, which is a very famous Psalm because it's the one the Jesus quoted while he was on the cross at Calvary, when he said, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me." That's the first line of Psalm 22, but because we're in the Easter season and not in Lent, the church quotes the second half of the Psalm. She quotes the ending of the Psalm which says this:

All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.

This Psalm, in other words, was a kind of prophecy of the conversion of the world to the truth of the gospel, and that's what the church is putting before us today.

So I close with these thoughts here. As we're pondering the spread of the good news, especially by the figures of Peter and Paul, the two chief apostles who were called in many ways the founders of the church — I mean we celebrate their feast together in the Catholic Church, the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul — it's important to remember why were they successful. Well, because they heeded the words of Christ in his Last Supper discourse, to abide in him, to remain in him and that you would know who his true disciples were by the fruit that they would bear. So what were the fruits of Peter's early efforts at evangelization? Some 5,000 conversions, right, just within Jerusalem alone. And as we're going to see, what were the fruits of Paul's apostolic activity? Well, look at nations of the world that worship Christ to this day. Look at the letters of the New Testament, some 13 letters are attributed explicitly to Paul in the New Testament and he's still teaching us today through letters. He's still bearing fruit wherever his letters are read and wherever the gospel is proclaimed. It's a powerful testimony to the truth of Jesus' principle in the vine and

the branches, that you'll know his disciples because they're not just going to bear some fruit, they're going to bear much fruit.

So I'll close with these words from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on how we too can abide in Christ and bear fruit. This is what the Catechism says in paragraph 2074:

Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." The fruit referred to in this saying is *the holiness of a life made fruitful by union with Christ*. When we believe in Jesus Christ, partake of his mysteries, and keep his commandments, the Savior himself comes to love, in us, his Father and his brethren, our Father and our brethren. *His person becomes, through the Spirit, the living and interior rule of our activity.*<sup>3</sup>

There's a lot in there to ponder but I want to highlight three things. First, notice the catechism identifies, what is the fruit? The fruit is the holiness of a life marked by union with Christ. So the way we bear fruit is to remain united to him. Second, the way we remain united to him is to believe, so through faith. To partake of his mysteries; the mysteries is an Eastern way of referring to the sacraments, so stay in the sacraments and the life of the church. And then finally, to keep his commandments, so works. So we have faith, sacraments, and works; all three of those things go together. It's not our works by themselves that unites us with Christ, but it's our works through grace that manifest our union with Christ and him working in us. And then third and finally, just the statement here that when we do all these things, Christ himself becomes the living and interior rule of our activity. That's a radical thing to realize. What the Catechism is basically saying there is that when we believe in Christ, obey Christ, and remain in the sacramental life of the church, whenever we do bear fruit, it's not actually us acting, it's Christ acting in us, it's him bearing fruit in us, it's him becoming the living and interior rule of our activity. It's basically St. John's way of expressing what Paul says, right. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And if you really begin to believe that and to live on it, it will totally change your life, to realize that everything good that I do, whatever good that I do is actually Christ living and working in me; and then the

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<sup>3</sup> CCC 2074

challenge becomes to live a life of holiness that's worthy of the Christ who dwells within me.