

5th Sunday of Easter

When I was looking at today's Gospel I found myself thinking about the subject of pruning. I am a real amateur at gardening, but I do at least know that it is necessary to cut things back in order to promote vigorous growth. And I thought I would do a little research on the Internet about vines. I found that, in order to make vines produce strong growth, the pruning seems quite drastic: according to one method, you wait until winter when you pull down the two outer shoots, cutting the middle shoot to three strong buds. In summer you stop the vertical shoots at a certain height, remove all sideshoots and thin the central branch to the three strongest shoots.

Now I don't know whether this method was used in Jesus' day, but I strongly suspect that something like it would have happened then. And, as always, Jesus uses a simple image to explain to his disciples what it means to be in Communion with Him. We are like shoots on a vine: the vine is Jesus, the Father the vinedresser. The barren branches are cut away, and the fruitful ones are pruned in order to make them even more fruitful.

So how are we, today's disciples, to interpret this? What does it mean to be fruitful? What does it mean to be pruned?

First, Jesus tells us that if we are truly part of the vine, then we will be fruitful. We have to remain part of the vine. In other words, we have to remain close to Jesus. But how do we do that? By remaining part of his Body, the Church, the Church which stretches its shoots, not only round the world, and of which we are merely part, but the Church whose roots go deep, deep back in the soil of the centuries, right back to Jesus himself. This same Jesus, who breathes his Spirit into his disciples, giving them the authority of the Apostles. It is this authority which, in turn, is passed onto their successors, the Bishops of the Church who ordain priests to serve under them. So we stay close to Jesus by staying part of the Church, the Historic Church, rooted in Jesus, rooted in history, served by successors of the Apostles, the bishops and priests. And just as shoots of the vine need nourishment, so we have the sacraments of the Church: especially the Blessed Sacrament, given to us in the Mass, to feed us and to help us to grow in spiritual strength and to renew in us the image of Jesus himself.

The Church also gives us the Bible, the sacred scriptures, which we are to read, to meditate on and to pray over. This, too, enables us, to be close to Jesus, grafted on to him. In Scripture, our Lord himself speaks to us, speaks the Truth because he is the Truth. He speaks to us of Life, because he is the Life. He shows us the way because he IS the Way. As he speaks, so we believe.

We have our neighbours: when we see someone downcast, rejected; sick or in prison, we see Christ. To be close to them is to be close to Christ.

These are the ways that enable us to draw close to and remain close to our Lord.

And in doing so, we become fruitful. We bear the fruits of the spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as S. Paul tells us in the letter to the Galatians. (Galatians 5.22)

All these seems straightforward enough. But what about this pruning bit? What is that all about?

Jesus tells us that, in the first instance, those who hear the word of God, listen to it, and live by it, are pruned already. But, of course, there is more to pruning than that. The vinedresser cuts away things, cuts back, cuts away all that will hinder good growth. That sounds as if it could also be painful at times: in times of illness, physical pain, in grief and in sorrow, we know what it is to be pruned painfully. This is never easy and, for many, can be a great trial. And here we have to learn the lesson of trust: that God, wherever we are, and whatever we are going through, is at our side. Not always seen, just as the disciples didn't see him straight away on the road to Emmaus, but nonetheless there. A lesson of trust, and of faith, too. But it is a lesson not easily learned; it may seem impossible at times, when pain haunts you in the early hours, or doubt, or fear, whether of the future or of the present, to trust in an invisible God. But learn it we must, if we are to continue to bear fruit that will last. People who have learned this lesson learn to let go. And they let go in the faith that, whatever happens, for apparent good or for apparent ill, God is ultimately in charge.

The great poet TS Eliot wrote these words:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art.

Those who have had surgery will know that it is not a pleasant experience. But surgeons prune us. They cut away the parts that, left in place, would kill us, because they have become the enemy within.

That is how God prunes us, cutting away the bits that are diseased, that have become the spiritual enemy within. His Son is the wounded Surgeon and it his compassion that we feel; and the pain that goes with it is the pain of healing.

Stay with the Lord. Stay with him in the Church and in the sacraments, in the scriptures and in the prayers. His pruning may at times be difficult, but it serves only one purpose: that we may continue to bear the fruit that will last into eternity.