

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter Sunday 2 May 2021**

### **Introduction and Call to Worship**

In our Gospel reading today we will hear how Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches who are called to bear much fruit. We come together to worship, to affirm our dependence on God and to commit to being fruitful disciples.

### **Invitation to Confession**

Let us come before God in thankfulness and humility, acknowledging those ways in which we have failed to be faithful disciples.

For the times when we have kept your love to ourselves, and not shared it with those around us.

Lord, have mercy.

For those times when we have known what you require of us, but chosen not to do it. Christ, have mercy.

For those times when we have been less than you created us to be and missed opportunities to glorify you through our lives.

Lord, have mercy.

### **Today's Readings**

#### **First Reading**

Acts 8:26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and

both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

### **Second Reading** 1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

### **Gospel** John 15:1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

### **HOMILY**

"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."  
John 15:8

### **Illustration**

When you sow a seed, there is first the anticipation of waiting for germination. Depending on what species you sow, this can take anything from a few days to several months, or even years. Grape seeds take between two and eight weeks – the more sunlight the seed receives each day, the quicker the germination.

But then, as any gardener knows, there is the thinning-out process. Most people plant several seeds per pot in the hope that at least one will grow. If they all germinate they compete for light and nutrients. It can feel counterintuitive to choose just one, the strongest and most promising, to grow on, and get rid of the others, but it's a process which has to be done in order to grow a strong plant. Many gardeners get sentimental about their seedlings and attempt to grow them all on. This doesn't end well – instead of one strong plant, they end up with two or more plants which are weaker and slower-growing.

Later, when the grapevine has established itself and is growing into a sturdy plant, it will start to throw out shoots. Now, again, decisions have to be made – only one or two shoots can be allowed to grow and be trained up stakes to become fruiting branches, the rest being cut back. In vineyards around the world this is known as the Guyot system.

## **Gospel Teaching**

The parable in today's Gospel makes hard reading. Having first cut away all but a couple of branches of his grapevine, the vine-grower then removes any remaining ones that are not fruiting and throws them on the fire. He is interested only in the branches that bear fruit – the rest are expendable. What God wants, the parable says, is disciples who will bear much fruit. Those who abide in Jesus will bear fruit, but those who do not bear fruit will be cast aside as rubbish, their lack of fruitfulness evidence of their lack of faithfulness as disciples. The relationship of dependence that exists between the branch and the vine reflects that between the disciple and Jesus. Just as the branch cannot fruit by its own efforts without being part of the vine, neither can disciples bear fruit in their lives without abiding in Jesus. While that is great for the branches that bear fruit, we cannot help thinking that it is less good news for the branches that are pruned and thrown into the fire. And, if we are honest, many of us are probably thinking that we are more likely to be cut off and thrown away – an idea that is quite challenging if we believe in a loving God – because we fear we may not be very good at bearing fruit.

## **Application**

There are no easy answers to the conundrum of how a loving God can advocate pruning and discarding those whom God has created. Maybe the parable is about not merely living for ourselves – the unfruitful branches – but through our lives providing sustenance and nourishment to others. And, as any gardener knows, pruning fruitful branches will make them more fruitful next season – so even the fruitful disciple can expect setbacks and challenges in life. Whatever the true meaning, however, what we can do is ask ourselves what fruitfulness might look like in our own lives.

Fruitfulness is about abundance – one seed yielding a great quantity of sweet fruit, out of all proportion to the original seed. It's about bounty – generosity, not only in terms of money and material resources, but also generosity of mind and spirit. It is about celebration – God's gifts of soil, rain and sun have brought into being something out of almost nothing, something good that enriches and sustains life.

With the seed of God's Word planted in our hearts, how can we best be fruitful? Each person's opportunities will be different, but we can each commit to abiding in Jesus and consciously seek to bear fruit that glorifies God. Our lives can bear fruit in our actions, our words, our relationships and our attitudes to God's creation. If our lives benefit only ourselves, we have to question whether we are, in fact, the unfruitful branches.

### **Summary**

1. When growing a grapevine, only one or two branches are allowed to grow – the rest are cut back.
2. It is challenging to think of God pruning people who fail to bear fruit.
3. Even those who bear fruit can expect to be pruned to make them even more fruitful.
4. This Gospel reading challenges us to think about what fruitful lives might look like in our context.

### **INTERCESSION**

#### **President**

Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Trusting in his word, we bring our prayers before God.

#### **Biddings**

We pray for the Church, for all the disciples of Jesus who seek to bear fruit in the world.

We pray for the world that God has created, and for all those who have hard decisions to make for the common good.

We pray for our community; that we may see those places where we need to bring God's love and peace.

We pray for all who suffer in mind or body, in illness, poverty or despair, asking God to show us how to bring loving care to them.

We pray for all those who have died; that they may find eternal peace, and for those who mourn them; that they may be comforted.

## **President**

Loving God, your Son has promised that our prayers will be heard. We trust in that promise, and we ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Introduction to the Peace**

“I am the vine, you are the branches,” says the Lord. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” The peace of the Lord...

## **Blessing**

Jesus said, “My Father is glorified by this,  
that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”  
Let us go out into the world to bear fruit and glorify God.  
And the blessing of God almighty...