

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2015
Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine you are the branches” is a scripture phrase we are all very familiar with. It is a wonderful and most beautiful biblical image. But actually the words we have in the text today are: 'I am the true vine.' Or as some scholars also translate it: 'I am the real vine.' What does “true vine” mean? Are we to assume that there is a false vine somewhere that we should avoid getting entangled with?

Certainly one obvious way of looking at this phrase is by understanding that Jesus is the source of real life; life in all its fullness and that what the world has to offer us is only a pale shadow.

Whatever is meant we should understand that this image of the vine was frequently used in the Old Testament as a description of the relationship between God and his people. There were elaborate carvings of the vine and the branches in the Temple and this image was also frequently used on the coinage to represent the people of Israel.

So it's a very rich and old image that St. John is drawing on; one that was in frequent use and easily understood by the people of what was essentially an agricultural nation.

And it's an image we can easily remember even if we aren't agriculturally inclined. Now, my brother Tommy has a real knack for trees. And he knows how important pruning is to promote growth and enable the tree, even if it's been neglected for years can be brought back to full health with the just the right amount of cutting.

It's the same way in the spiritual life. To stay spiritually healthy a good bit of pruning is necessary on a regular basis.

But even if there's neglect in our spiritual pruning, all is never lost and it's never too late to make an amazing comeback.

Now it seems obvious that the spiritual life has nothing to do with producing apples or pears. So what kind of fruit can we expect our spiritual life to produce?

Well, the first thing we have to say about this metaphor of spiritual fruit is that we're talking about growth—growth that is natural and organic. And any kind of growth requires movement and change.

As Cardinal Newman once said: "To live is to change and to be perfect means to have changed often." In fact change is the only sign of life. And change is difficult. But change is what we're about. Change is of the very essence of Christianity. Take the change out of Christianity and it's dead in the water.

The whole aim and purpose of the Church is to bring about conversion, radical change. But this is the very opposite of how the ordinary person, and indeed many of us, perceive the Church.

We tend to think of the Church as a rigid, static organization anchored to the past with nuns armed with rulers. And naturally there are essential aspects of Christianity that are anchored in the past; the teaching of Jesus Christ to start with, which is at the very heart of what the Church is about.

And we are called to be firm in holding on to these teachings and not let them be not let them be water-downed no matter how unpopular or unfashionable they may be perceived. But this teaching of Jesus is a call to conversion. This is why the Church is called: ever the same, ever new. We hold on firmly to the teaching of Jesus and we resist any watering-down but we are open to change especially within ourselves.

And this conversion is possible only if we are open to the promptings of the Spirit. As we have progressed through our lives we want to strive to develop a special sensitivity to God's

way of working and to see his hand in all things. We allow him to push us forward; to deepen our faith; and to continually find new ways to model our lives on Jesus.

The life of the Christian therefore can never be merely passive, just as love can never be passive. If we are truly in love with someone then we are always on the lookout for things we can do to please the other.

We try to help them; we look for opportunities to demonstrate our love; we try to change the things in us that cause them irritation. It is exactly the same for the Christian who loves God.

This is active Christianity. This is a faith that is truly dynamic and living. And prayer brings about change in our lives; maybe it's only very slow and gradual, but it does change us. It does move us forwards; it does gradually draw us ever closer to God, the source and summit of all life and love. This is spiritual fruitfulness; a coming to the fulfillment of all that we were made for.