

*Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B*  
*Lectio divina on Jn 15, 1-8*

Jesus uses the traditional image of the vineyard to develop one of the favourite themes of John's gospel, that of the vine and how to care for it. He is speaking to his disciples on the night he was betrayed. His words have an obvious dramatic effect, and real significance for our understanding of Church. Being rooted in Jesus is the key to fidelity for a community of disciples that are about to lose his physical presence. Remaining in him frees them from the anxiety brought about by his disappearance. Nobody will lose him except those who want to lose him. Making their home in him is the way to have him and not be lost. Like the branch of the vine, the life of the community is guaranteed, as long as it remains anchored in Jesus. This 'remaining in Jesus' can be tested – by the fruit it bears. A love that bears no fruit and a faith that is not exercised need to be pruned. Love that does not bear fruit is destined to be burnt, like useless foliage. But the disciple who does good deeds bears fruit and remains rooted in Jesus, and his desires will be brought to fruition. Whatever he asks of God will be granted. Christ will not leave unanswered the desires of one who does his will. This is the life-giving power of Christ the true vine.

**At that time: Jesus said to his disciples, <sup>1</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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 burnt. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.**

**Read: understand what the text is saying, focussing on how it says it.**

The discourse of Jesus on the true vine (Jn 15,1-2) opens abruptly, without introduction (Jn 14,31). It is not, strictly speaking, either a parable or an allegory. It uses the Old Testament image of the vineyard, and some Eucharistic references from early Christian writings (Did 9, 2). The vine is part of the vegetation of the land of Canaan (Num 13, 23; 1 Kings 5,5). As a symbol (Ho 10,1; Is 5,1-6; Jer 2,21; Ps 80,9-16; Ezk 15,1-8) it served to illustrate God's covenant, the infidelity of the people and their punishment. In the Old Testament the vine or vineyard was never used as an image of the Messiah. It referred always to the people of God.

Its use in John to refer to Jesus is therefore unusual and daring. The image needs to be interpreted and Jesus does so immediately. He himself is the vine. The vinedresser, the one who is responsible for its maintenance, is the Father (Jn15, 1). Jesus is the only vine that did not disappoint the owner, who is the Father. The vine gives life, but it is the property of the Father. All the attention and work come from the Father. Jesus is authentic because he

corresponds exactly to the designs of the Father and fulfils perfectly the Father's expectations. Jesus renders that fidelity to the Father possible, for anyone who lives in him and draws life from him, in the same way as the branch draws life from the vine. It is from this personal fidelity that Jesus is able to give life to the disciples who are the branches. As the vinedresser, God himself cultivates his property. In winter he cuts and tears away the unproductive stems. In spring he prunes and cleans the surplus branches (Jn 15, 2). The purpose of this pruning by the vinedresser is for the branches to bear fruit. In the life of the disciple, painful pruning and fruitful production go hand in hand. God prunes in order to improve the fruitfulness of those who are grafted on to Christ.

When they are pruned, the disciples are already clean and purified (Jn 15, 3), thanks to the word of Jesus which has separated them from the world and rooted them in God. First it was the Father who pruned. Now it is Jesus who cleans. (Jn 13, 10). His word is the principle of separation, of purification and of fruitfulness. Purification is a gift, totally unmerited. From here arises the need for mutual indwelling (Jn 15, 4. 5). It is not enough to be with him, and to be purified by his word. It is necessary to remain with him in order to bear fruit. A bit of imagination helps to clarify the meaning of this: it has never happened that a branch cut off from the vine was productive. So the disciple must remain with Jesus if he is to be productive. Union and fruitfulness are inseparable. The fruitfulness of the disciple depends on his fidelity to Christ. Separated from Christ, the disciple withers.

By repeating the formula of revelation, "I am the vine" (Jn 15, 5) Jesus introduces a new dimension of the theme of indwelling: the relationship between Jesus and the disciples is an intimate one, "You are the branches." The Christian's ability to bear fruit depends on his being rooted in Christ. Without him, he can do nothing (Jn 15, 5; 1,3). Separation from Christ leads not only to barrenness but to ruin. If the branch does not bear fruit it will wither and be burnt. The process is irreversible. It is described quickly and effectively. Not to remain in Jesus leads inevitably to perdition (Jn 15, 6).

We remain in him only if his word remains in us, and this ensures that we will be heard when we pray (Jn 15, 7; 14,10.13). Keeping his word guarantees union of life and of will between Jesus and the believer. Anyone who follows Jesus' word, knows that his desires are heard by God. Obedience to Christ ensures that the Father listens to us. Christian living means remaining in Christ so that we can bear fruit and do the work of Christ, which is to the glory of the Father.

### **Meditate: apply what the text says to life**

It comes as no surprise to us to hear Jesus being described as to the true vine. We are so used to the words that they no longer make much impression on us. And yet, the image is quite unusual. None of us would have dared to call Jesus a vine, much less the true vine! Why did Jesus do so? What did he mean by that image?

His first listeners probably did not have the same difficulty that we have. They knew very well that the image of the vine had been used repeatedly in scripture to refer to the people of God. Israel was spoken of sometimes as the vine, sometimes as the vineyard, the property of God. They were the people cared for by God, the object of his attention, the place where he

laboured. The people of Israel knew that God loved them, and cared for them, as a good vinedresser cares for his favourite vineyard. He spoiled them! But the disciples must have been surprised that Jesus adapted that image and applied it to his own person: "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser." The care and preoccupation of the Father for Jesus are similar to the worries and hopes that a man has for his property, and the anxiety and effort that it costs him. God is completely committed to Jesus, as the owner is to his vineyard. Therefore, if we wish to share in the Father's care and attention, we must remain in Christ, the vine whom the Father cares for. Belonging to a particular people, however holy that people may be, does not make us the object of the Father's attention. Only if we remain in Jesus, the Son of God, do we share in the attention the Father lavishes on him. If our lives are rooted in Jesus, as the branch is rooted in the vine, then, and only then, are we assured of the personal, solicitous, fatherly care and attention of God. We need to overcome our scepticism and stop doubting God's love and care for us and our families, for our little world, and the world at large. We need to ask ourselves why is it, and when is it, that we do not feel cared for by God. The fault surely does not lie with God, as Jesus demonstrated very clearly to his disciples.

1. *"As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."* If we wish to feel the powerful hand of God, the warmth of his presence, and the consolation of his company, we must opt for Christ and become attached to him as the branch is to the vine. Too often nowadays, we Christians pay attention to Jesus on Sundays and holydays, and on the other days, the days that really matter, we follow other voices and other masters. We spend our days looking for things that have nothing to do with Christ. We put our trust in other people or other ideas. We have plans or dreams that are beyond our reach. We think that if we find the right job, or if we win the lottery, all our problems will be solved. We try to secure our future without Christ, or with a half-hearted commitment to Christ, but we are not serious about searching for him. We plan our lives without paying heed to what he asks of us. We may want to bear fruit but if we put our roots anywhere other than in Jesus, we will not feel loved by God. We are condemned to live our lives, deprived of his loving care and attention.

If, on the other hand, we make Jesus Christ the whole reason of our being, the aim of all our projects, the root of our hopes and the place where our hopes flourish, then we will feel loved by God. We will experience him as our Father and friend, as he was for Jesus. It is not difficult to feel loved by God. All it requires is that we live united to Jesus, in his life and his death, in his works and his thoughts, cost what it may – and it certainly does cost! It costs more than we are ready to give. But if we are not prepared to pay the price, we stand to lose something far greater, which is the love and attention of God.

2. *"Every branch in me that bears no fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit."* God is good, but that does not mean that we can expect only good things from him. The vinedresser cares for the vine by pruning it, and makes it stronger by cutting away the useless parts that bear no fruit. That is how God acts towards us. Like the vinedresser who tends the vine, God does not care for us just in the hope that we will bear good fruit, but in the hope that, as a result of his work, we will bear better fruit than what we already bear. As a Father, he loves his children, not because we are already good, but

because he wants us to be better. We should not be surprised if God's action in our lives disturbs us, or goes against our wishes. The vine has to be pruned and without God's pruning action we will not feel really loved and cared for. Feeling at ease with someone is not the same thing as feeling loved. A love that makes no demands is a cheap love that has no consequences. Love of that kind is easily given and easily withheld. This is not the kind of love God has for those whom he loves, because they are rooted in his beloved son, and attached to Jesus Christ.

We have to ask ourselves, then, if we are ready to suffer God's attention, if we want God to care for us and if we are ready to pay the price for his love. It may happen that we complain of not having something, when the truth is we are not prepared to give anything in exchange. When we know that God is caring for us, we do not live in daily fear of evil or misfortune. Knowing that we are in God's hands and in his heart does not guarantee that there will be no tragedy or error in our lives. We should not expect to be privileged people just because we are believers. We know, without any doubt, that God will not abandon us, and that he cares about us. We feel his hand upon us. Instead of spending our time asking God to treat us better, we should be happy to accept whatever God wants to happen to us. Does the vine protest when it is pruned to make it more fruitful? Does the son doubt his father's love if the father expects more of him because he loves him?

What is even more important – we should not forget what Jesus says, that the vine which has not been pruned and cleaned, withers and is destined to be burnt. We cannot rebel against God's will. If we want to be regarded as sons, we must accept the Father's authority over us. If we reject God's discipline in our lives, we will be deprived of his care and attention. And if this happens to us, we do not know what we are missing. Anyone who remains in Christ enjoys the Father's loving care and receives whatever he asks for. If we allow ourselves to be cared for by God, we will produce the fruits that he wants of us. God will see to it that even the smallest desires of our hearts will bear fruit. We could not expect more from a God who loves us as much as our God loves his children. This is how God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, loves those who remain in his Son and make him their source of life. The reward of the disciple who remains in the Son is to be heard by the Father.

