

## 5<sup>th</sup> Easter- Vine and branches

Did I tell you that I grew up in a farm? My Daddy was a farmer and we raised several kinds of spices like black pepper, ginger, and cardamom. We also raised different kinds of trees. Some trees provided direct sources of food in the form of fruit such as bananas, guavas, mangoes and Jack fruit. These fruits can also be sold in market as a source of income. Some trees provided a direct income to the farmer such as coffee, cacao and coconut, rubber tree.

How to plant a tree? The simplest way to plant a tree is from a seed. And some trees can be planted only from a seed. Some other types of trees are best planted from 'cuttings', or 'stakes'. When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade or so, I was interested in planting trees too. I was trying to plant rubber tree from a cutting. I planted it and started watering it for several days. But as days passed by the leaves started to wither away, and finally the branch died. Then it was no more a branch but became a stick. Finally, my daddy saw what I was doing and told me the simplest way to plant a rubber tree is from a seed. Planting a branch will not work for a rubber tree.

The other day I found a branch underneath a tree in my backyard. I guess it had been broken off by the wind. There were no leaves at all. It was completely dead. In fact, I wouldn't even call it a branch; I would call it a stick. Do you think that if I took that branches out into the yard and planted them in the ground and watered them they would come back to life? No, that wouldn't work; because the branches get the nutrients that they need to live from the tree. Branches cannot live or grow without the tree. Without the tree, there will never be leaves on the branches. If the branch comes from a fruit tree, there will never be fruit on the branch if it is separated from the tree. If I take this dead branch and plant it in the ground and water it, it won't come back to life, it will just be an old stick in the mud.

That same thing is true about our life with Jesus. Listen to what Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." If we keep our life connected to Jesus, we will grow. Our life will produce beautiful leaves and delicious fruit. But if we are separated from Jesus, our leaves will wither and die and we will never put forth any fruit. What will your life be? Will you be a beautiful branch on the tree...or will you just be a stick in the mud?

Max Lucado in his book, *When God Whispers Your Name* he tells the example “Take a fish and place him on a beach. Watch his gills gasp and scales dry. Is he happy? No! How do you make him happy? Do you cover him with a mountain of cash? Do you get him a beach chair and sunglasses? Do you bring him a *Playfish* magazine and a martini? Do you wardrobe him in double-breasted fins and people-skinned shoes? Of course not! So, how do you make him happy? You put him back in his element. That’s what you do. You put him back in the water. He will never be happy on the beach because he was not made for the beach. Indeed so, and the same is true for you and me. We will never be happy living apart from the One who made us and saved us. Just like a fish was made to live in water... we were made to live in close fellowship with our Lord... and nothing can take the place of that.”

Introduction: Today’s scripture selections emphasize the need for Christians to abide in Christ as a condition for producing fruits of kindness, mercy, charity and holiness. The first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, testifies to the abundance of spiritual fruits yielded by the apostles because of their close bond with the risen Lord. The reading tells us how the Lord pruned the former Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, a fanatic who had persecuted the Church, to produce a fruit-bearing branch called Paul, the zealous Apostle to the Gentiles, entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the gospel. Even Paul’s forced return to Tarsus for a brief period is an example of God’s pruning of the vine to bring forth a greater harvest, namely, the mission to the Gentiles. In today’s second reading, John, in his first letter to the Church, explains that only if we remain united to Christ by putting our faith in him and drawing our spiritual strength from him, will we be able to obey God’s commandments, especially the commandment of love. In the gospel, taken from the Last Supper discourse, Jesus uses his favorite image of the vine and branches to

help his disciples understand the closeness of their relationship with him and the necessity of maintaining it. They are not simply rabbi and disciples. Their lives are mutually dependent - as close as a vine and its branches. In fact, in using this image, Jesus is explaining to them and to us what our relationship with him should be like.

Life messages: 1) We need pruning in our Christian life. Cutting out of our lives everything that is contrary to the spirit of Jesus and renewing our commitment to Christian ideals in our lives every day is the first type of self-imposed pruning expected of us. A second means of pruning is to practice self-control over our evil inclinations, sinful addictions and aberrations. Cordial mingling with people of different cultures, races, religions and orientations in our neighborhood and society enable us to prune our selfish and prejudicial tendencies as we treat others in the society with Christian charity and openness. Jesus prunes, purifies and strengthens us by allowing us to face pain and suffering, contradictions and difficulties with the courage of our Christian convictions. 2) We need to abide in Christ and let Christ abide in us: The four gospels teach us how to become true disciples of Jesus and how to abide in him as branches abide in the main trunk of the vine drawing their life from it. Personal and liturgical prayers, frequenting of the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation, daily and meditative reading of the Bible and selfless, loving acts of kindness and mercy and forgiveness enable us to abide in Jesus, the true vine, as fruit-bearing branches.

Back in 1981, the attention of the world was focused on the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. The reporter of a newspaper was describing the arrival of the entourage to the Cathedral where the wedding was to take place. He described how all the royal family were carried in special royal coaches to the Cathedral while Lady Diana arrived in the coach of a commoner. Then there was this rather

telling sentence in the newspaper account. “Lady Diana came to the church as a commoner; she departed as royalty.” This is a vivid description of what grace is all about. We come as sinners, but grace turns us into heirs and joint heirs with Christ of all that God wants to give us. It also is a vivid description of the possibility that comes to each one of us – the possibility of a deeper walk with Christ. Jesus said to his disciples, “*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.*” Ponder that awesome truth. We have not chosen God; God has chosen us. In His extravagant grace, He has given us His love, and confronted us with His call. We arrive in his presence as commoners; we leave as royalty.