

Homily – 5th Sunday of Easter

Today's Gospel, as you know, is the Vine and the Branches, and Jesus explains to his disciples that he is the vine, and we are the branches, and his Father is the caretaker of the vineyard. Last week, Jesus spoke that he was the Good Shepherd, that he calls us by name, that he comes to lead us into green pastures, that he will always be with us, that he will never abandon us, that he will see to all the things that cause us pain. When we call upon him, he will heal us, and he will be near us, and he will never abandon us.

These are very encouraging words, but we must think "What is Jesus doing with these two parables?" One is the Good Shepherd and the other one is the Vine.

It is the context that adds meaning. Jesus spoke these words at the end of the Last Supper, his last message to his closest followers. So it seems right to tell a story about last words.

Greg Livorski put this story on Quora: "My mother married my stepfather when I was a teenager. We had a somewhat difficult relationship, although it was readily apparent that he adored my mother and treated her very well. A decade or so into their marriage, his health declined. After several years of painful existence and numerous hospital stays, he found himself in the ICU. It was clear that he did not have long to live. He went in and out of consciousness over those last two days. A priest came to administer last rites."

"At one point, I stood alone beside his bed, and he mustered enough strength to speak. He told me, 'Take care of your body and read a lot of books on different subjects.' I acknowledged him. He added, 'And take care of your mother.' He then slipped back into unconsciousness. I never heard him speak again. Those last words only reaffirmed to me what a great husband my mother had found, for in his last moments, he was still concerned about her welfare. That night, he passed away in his sleep."

Last words and actions speak loudly. Returning to Jesus in the gospel, we recall that He has washed the disciples feet. He has told them how much he loves them. He has told them they must learn to wash each other's feet, that they must learn to be givers and not takers, that they have been chosen to bring the message to the whole world. He came with a message of compassion and forgiveness, of self-sacrifice, of caring, of building a community on the love of God and the love of each other.

He now comes to the end of the supper. And that adds a certain sharpness to the words "I am the vine and you are the branches." Because a shepherd is one step removed from us. He is one who guides us, who walks beside us which is a beautiful image.

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But when he says, “I am the vine and you are the branches,” he means, “I am with you, and you are with me, and there’s no separation. The life of God is with you. The presence of God is with you. And you will not understand this now.” But in a few moments he will walk out into Gethsemane and the Passion will begin. And these will be the last words that Jesus says to them in the way that he has been with them, because, when he leaves Gethsemane, the next time they will see him is on a cross, and they will bury him, and then, of course, will come the Resurrection.

So the meaning of the words he speaks to them, and to all of us, is very plain. The Risen Lord will be with us, will be part of us. He will live with us. He will be with us all through our lives. He will never desert us. Because he has made a relationship with us that is full of intimacy. There is no separating him and ourselves.

This is not just a relationship of brothers and sisters. This is a relationship of life itself. For the God that has sent him is with him and he has made us one with the Father and one with the Spirit.

And that is why it’s so important to him that they know this, because, in a few hours, they will all deny him and run away and be scattered. And he wants them to remember what he said while they were sitting eating the Last Supper with him, when he was sharing his whole life.

It is very important, then, that when he says to us “I am the vine and you are the branches,” what it really means is that we, as Christians, do not just walk with him. He is within us, in each other, in our community, in those outside our community.

And that means that, when we look at each other, we must look at each other the way he did. When we treat each other, we must treat each other the way we are, not just solitary individuals being nice to each other. We wash each others feet. We are people who are filled with the life of God in an intimacy that will last for all eternity. This is why today Jesus says to them, “You cannot separate the vine from the branches. You cannot separate the branches from the vine.”

He will be with us, but it is our turn to walk the way he walked, to care the way he cared, to love the way he loved. This is the way that the Kingdom of God shall gradually take over the whole world.

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No matter what happens, no matter what the difficulties are in your life, what the difficulties are around us, we must answer the difficulties with goodness, kindness, forgiveness and faith.

No matter what happens in life we must remember how we are called to live: We must be kind, be thoughtful, be caring, be the things that are visible signs of the Kingdom.

And then indeed we will understand when he says, “I send you out with the message of forgiveness and love, that you might change the world.”