

## **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

**April 29, 2018**

*First Reading – Acts 9:26-31*

*Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 22*

*Second Reading – 1 John 3:18-24*

*Gospel – John 15:1-8*

My dear people of God:

I wish to start our reflection today with the beautiful Responsorial Psalm which goes this way: *I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.* I would love to imagine that Paul must have said this because he had lived it by becoming a proclaimer of the love of God.

Our first reading describes to us the constant growth of the Church despite persecution. We just heard the story of Saint Paul's early ministry. From Saul, the persecutor, to Paul, the defender of the Faith.

Sometime after Saul's conversion in Damascus, he came to Jerusalem and joined himself to the disciples. But they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple already. Although they might have heard something of his conversion and its circumstances; still, they seemed inclined to regard the whole affair as a front to deceive them and persecute them still more. Barnabas, having taken him, brought him to the apostles and narrated to them how along the way to Damascus he saw the Lord, and that He spoke to him, and how in Damascus he was speaking boldly in the name of Jesus.

While in Jerusalem he proclaimed boldly the name of the Lord to the Hellenist-Jews or the Greek-speaking Jews. Please know that most Jews spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, but there were a handful of Greek-speaking Jews, too. They regarded themselves as more educated than the Hebrews. But the Hebrews considered them as outsiders. These Greek-speaking Jews were trying to kill Saul. It would be easy to assume that these Hellenist-Jews regarded Saul not so much as a traitor to Judaism but as somebody too ambitious. The disciples (brethren) having heard of the plot, brought him down to Caesarea, to send him forth to Tarsus, his native city.

It is interesting to know that this is the time that the early Christians throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace. They were being built up, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and they increased in number. This was definitely due to the conversion of the chief agent of persecution. Saul now became the most ardent and most zealous propagator of the faith. The persecutor of the Christians is now a defender of their faith.

Let us go to the Second Reading which we took from the first letter of John. This first letter emphatically describes to us the situation of the community founded and nurtured by John. We could safely guess that John's letter to his early Christian community was a response to an existing situation:

- (1) some members were advocating false doctrines, by refusing to accept the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus.
- (2) Others disregarded the commandment of love of neighbor;
- (3) still others refused to accept Faith in Christ as the source of sanctification and denied the redemptive value of Jesus' death.

John says in the opening sentence in today's reading: *"Little children, let us love in deed and in truth and not merely talk about it."* John was correcting "pious" Christians who were comfortable with their pettiness and uncaring indifference. All they had was the vertical relationship with God, with no care for their needy neighbors. John declared: *"His commandment is this: We are to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and are to love one another as He commanded us"*. John gave the best essence of Christianity. Today, John is warning us not to fall into extreme ideological positions that threaten the Church, namely:

- (1) cultic and dogmatic conservatism: the type of spirituality which prides in worship without good works; those who practice this spirituality maintain only their vertical relationship with God, regardless of the needs of others
- (2) liberalism, which reduces Christianity to "living peacefully" with others, but does not aim at sanctifying oneself and others.

So, John exhorted his community: "Keep God's commandments". In today's second reading, John is inviting us to embrace a transformed life, flowing from a mutual, intimate relationship between God and us, and among us, too, as individual believers. We must love one another with the same selfless, sacrificial, forgiving love with which Jesus Christ loved us. Indeed, that is His

command to us. John also teaches us that personal assurance of salvation doesn't depend on intense religious experience but on our participative and fruitful incorporation into Christ and His Church.

Now, let us go to the Gospel:

God always promised an "abiding" presence before Jesus' coming and after His Ascension into Glory, as well as after the Pentecost. That promise is an invitation to experience the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as a saving and liberating presence in the midst of our day-to-day world. Please note the emphatic first person, singular in the present tense in John's gospel. His gospel is rich with the "I AM" pronouncements of Jesus. It is rich in its imagery of the vine with other distinctive Johannine images of the identity and mission of Jesus in relation to that of his chosen community of followers:

- (1) I AM bread of life in chapter 6, verse 35;
- (2) I AM light of the world in chapter 8, verse 12;
- (3) I AM the door of the sheep in chapter 10, verse 7;
- (4) I AM the resurrection and the life in chapter 11, verse 25

My dear people of God: please know that we are in the scene of the Last Supper. This is the address of Jesus to His disciples just prior to His passion (John 14-16). Today, the church reminds us of the Lord's promise that we are not abandoned or left alone. We must be confident of the Lord's continuing presence among us in the world long after His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Twice He promises "I AM the vine." And in that promise something happens. There is an event in which we "become" something new - we are transformed by a new reality in which we are empowered and commissioned as disciples. That new reality is signaled in several aspects of the Jesus' promise.

Jesus is the true vine. He is in a deep relationship with the Father and wants to reveal the Father's love to us. All that the FATHER IS and what the FATHER DOES are now seen in JESUS who is both (1) the "Word become flesh" and (2) the ONE whom God raised from the dead.

Everything that the Father does, including his work of pruning and cleansing the branches, is tempered and understood through the "Word" made flesh, JESUS. Jesus is the WORD of the FATHER and continues to speak that WORD to His disciples.

**Just as Jesus is intimately related to the Father, so we, the branches must abide in relationship with our resurrected Lord; otherwise, we can do nothing.**

**“I AM the vine, you are the branches” It is clear that these words are intended as an invitation and promise. The promise is likewise underscored in its two-fold repetition: apart from Jesus you can do nothing.**

**The promise of "abiding" in Jesus is not for its own sake, nor an end in itself. Jesus imagines and promises a dynamic and changing life for the disciples and for the community. Vines are pruned and cleansed. Branches that wither and are dying, are removed.**

**Such a promise invites us into the abiding relationship in which vine and branches are held together by the ONE whose glory is seen in His being lifted up on the cross for us and in a Father who also is glorified when those who abide in that Son are revealed in the faithful bearing of fruit in service to the world.**

**May God bless us. Amen.**