

ECHOING GOD’S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
May 2, 2021

SCRIPTURES:

Acts 9:26-31	Saul witnesses to the Risen Lord.
1 John 3:18-24	Love of one another testifies to our love of God.
John 15:1-8	We are branches on the Vine which is Christ.
Psalm 22	Together let us praise his name in worship.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

John:

With this passage about the True Vine and the Branches, John introduces us to the last of the great “I AM” discourses of Jesus. (Remember that I AM is the name of God. Jesus identifies himself with the Father here and elsewhere.) In Chapter 15, we hear the three dimensions of the life of believers: 1. their relationship to Jesus, 2. to one another, 3. to the world. First, our essential connection with Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the Father’s intention for Israel. In the Jewish Scripture, the people of God are God’s vineyard. God prunes it and protects it.

In Jesus Christ, we become the new vineyard of God, the new Israel. The disciples of Jesus also bring glory to God when they live out their destiny and their mission given them by Christ. For John, it is as if the glory of God is not complete merely by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God’s glory also requires that the followers of Jesus contribute their own dimension to that glory. The lives of the disciples are an essential component of the glory that belongs to the Father.

The very life that is in Christ also is to be found in those who are his friends and his followers. Those who belong to Christ are alive in the same divine life that resides in him by right as firstborn of the Father. In John’s Gospel, those who are disciples do not merely follow Jesus in their behaviors, their moral living, or their Jesus-centered ministries. They truly live of the same life that makes the Risen Lord present in all the world. The Spirit that has been breathed into them makes them alive now by the same life that is in Christ. We cannot live God’s life if we cut ourselves off from the Vine which is the Living Christ. Sin separates us from the True Vine. We enter into death through sin. We return to where we were before the life of Christ was poured into us by the Holy Spirit. Only the mercy of God and his forgiveness can restore us to life. We need to cling to the Lord Jesus Christ so that we may live forever.

Acts:

Saul had been an ardent and cruel persecutor of the Christian community. Now, in his conversion to Christ, he attempts to witness as an apostle. Some in the community do not trust him. What could he possibly know about Jesus of Nazareth? Where did he get his message anyway? Who will verify the authenticity of his preaching and of his commitment to Christ? Barnabas is a beloved and trusted person in the community. He undertakes the sponsorship of Saul. He stands by Saul and speaks to the community concerning the validity of Saul's ministry. Such is the role of a sponsor in the Church. Now that Saul is himself a Christian, the Church enjoys a respite from persecution, for a time! We, too, may be questioned about where we got our teaching about Jesus Christ. The Church community witnesses for us. What the Church has been given, we give in return to those who come after us.

1 John:

The First Letter of John addresses the profound question of our transformation into the likeness of God and the expression of this transformation in a loving life. Love is the sign that we have passed from death to life. If we do not love, we are still in death and have not been reborn in Christ. Love is manifested in deeds of love. Just feeling guilty for our sins is no sign of rebirth. Just uttering pious devotions is no sign of rebirth. Concrete, practical deeds of caring for others are the only authentic sign. Through Jesus, we can be "bold before God." The word used here in Greek is the same word used to show that citizens have a right to speak freely before the assembly of their fellow citizens. We have the right to speak before the throne of God because in baptism we have become children of God.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you express the fact that the life which is in the Risen Christ now gives life and power to your human existence in this world? Do you value being connected to the True Vine so that you can produce his fruit? Are you sometimes concerned that you might be separated from Jesus and not be able to pass on the life of grace that is in you? Do you see deliberate sin as a real death-dealing event in your life?

2. What image do you suggest for your life-giving connection with the Lord Jesus Christ? Is there some image which means more to you than that of the Vine and the Branches? Some people find it helpful to discover their own images to express the truths of the Gospel. How do you visualize your attachment to the Lord Jesus?

3. Are you able to imagine the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ as a vast organism which is animated from the inside, spiritually, by the very life of the Lord? Can you see that the life that is in you is also in each person whom God loves? What are the implications for our love of neighbor? (St. Teresa of Calcutta said that she sees the face of Christ in the faces of the poorest of the poor.)

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Speak to one other person this week about the value of being connected vitally to the Lord Jesus Christ. Share what it means to you to be a branch on the Vine which is Christ Jesus.

PRAYER

Merciful Father,
may these mysteries give us new purpose
and bring us to new life in you.

Prayer after Communion: 5th Sunday of Easter

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The image of the Vine and the Branches is one that has meant a great deal to people in the Mediterranean world. A vineyard is very familiar to them; perhaps less so to us. We know a little about Napa Valley in California. Surely, we can conjure up the image of a vine that has a single “trunk” going into the ground but “branches out” into a multitude of segments with leaves and bunches of grapes. Pruning helps keep the branches strong and fruit filled. Cut any branch off from the “trunk” and it certainly dies.

The early Church fondly remembered the image of the Vine and the Branches from the words of Jesus. They knew that the Church community was now the Vineyard of the Lord. God loved the Vineyard. God had surely planted this Vineyard. Who else but God could care for and protect and give fruit to the Church?

Unity with Christ was seen as totally essential. Cut off from Christ, the members of the Church would wither and die. The Vineyard itself was threatened if Christ were not its center and its very life. Nurtured by the risen life of the Savior, the Vineyard thrived in spiritual health and produced much fruit for the kingdom of God.

Unity with one another in the Church also finds a basis in this image of the Vineyard. Surely, the branches of a vine cannot exist without one another. In the Church, we very much need each other for our spiritual growth and development. We contribute and receive from each other the vital life that comes from the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Any behavior that threatens the unity of the Church community blocks the lifeblood given by Christ for the holiness of all the members. The Vineyard of the Lord continues to thrive and we within it. God’s grace continues to be poured into our lives from the risen life of Christ. The faith community lives from the life that flowed from the side of Christ as he hung on the cross. We live the life of the Risen Lord already as we renew our baptism on Sundays in the Eucharist.

The Spirit of Christ breathed upon us continues to give us divine energy to live out the precepts of the Lord. There is no greater power than that which we get from Christ as we celebrate his death and resurrection in liturgy.

See: The Catechism: #787-796

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