

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER - MAY 3rd 2015

WHOEVER REMAINS IN ME AND I IN HIM WILL BEAR MUCH FRUIT – Biblical commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Jn 15, 1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.

Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.

Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.

By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples".

In a famous passage from the Book of Prophet Ezekiel, we find a description of the wood of a vine. Which are its good qualities? None. Vine's wood is the only kind of wood among those of country's trees that is useless; it can't be used to make objects or useful tools. It is only good for conveying the vital sap to branches and bear fruit. Vine's wood, then, is only useful for bearing fruit. This is the image taken from the Book of Ezekiel that Jesus recalls in this famous speech of vine and branches, found in Chapt. 15 of John's Gospel.

Once again, Jesus claims the fullness of his divine condition. When he says "*I am*", this represents the fullness of the divine condition, for "*I am*" is the name of God.

In the culture of Israel, vine was the image used to symbolize people. There's the famous love canticle of God for his vineyard, contained in Chapt. 5 of Book of Isaiah; also Jeremiah speaks of Israel as a

vineyard. Well, Jesus defines himself as *"the true vine"*; hence, there are some that are not. Jesus is carrying on the process of replacing Israel's realities with his same person:

- no more manna from heaven, but Jesus who is the true bread that conveys life to people
- no more Law, Jesus is the true light
- Jesus is the true vine, he is the true people planted by the Lord.

And the Father is *"the vine grower"*. There are distinct roles, then: Jesus is the vine, where life sap flows, the Father is the vine grower. Which is the vine grower's concern? That the vineyard bears fruit. So the evangelist writes *"He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit"*. Which is the meaning of this expression? The evangelist is talking about the Christian community which receives God's love and turns it into love for others. This is typical of Eucharist. In Eucharist we receive Jesus, who turned himself into bread, a source of life, therefore getting the ability of turning ourselves into bread for others, into life for others. In this Christian community there might be a person who assimilates this loving energy, represented by bread, but is not able to turn it into love for others. He's a passive element, who only thinks of himself, not being able to convey life to anyone.

Well, neither Jesus nor other branches take this useless branch away, only the Father does.

"And everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit", that is the branch that by assimilating this vital sap, namely the branch that receives Jesus as bread in the Eucharist, and turns himself into bread for others, bears fruit. It's unpleasant to notice that translators still translate the verb with 'to prune' which is not the one used by the evangelist. The one used by John is 'to purify'. These are two very different concepts. What does he mean by 'purifying'? The Father, who wants that every branch bears much more fruit, is the one able to single out all harmful elements, uncleannesses, faults that branches have and eliminates them. The action of the Father is very important; branch should not concentrate on himself, trying to find faults or weaknesses, for he might cause a serious and irreversible damage.

Man fulfills himself if he doesn't think of himself, of his spiritual perfection, which might be as much illusory and far, as great is his ambition; he must concentrate on completely devoting himself to others, which is immediate. Everyone has weaknesses, faults or harmful inclinations; well, we don't have to worry about that. The Father will take care of them; when he realizes that these weaknesses prevent us branches from bearing fruit, he will eliminate them. It's not up to us. If we do it, we might even touch some important aspects of our life which are maybe our structure's bearing threads and cause serious damage.

So the Father 'purifies it'. This guarantees a great serenity; the only concern for branch must be bearing fruit; all what prevents it from bearing much fruit will be taken away by the Father, not by other branches or by the vine, but only by the Father. Why? *"So that it bears more fruit"*.

Jesus states: *"You are already pruned"*. The right translation is "you are already pure". The evangelists uses a similarity, then, between the verb 'to purify' and the adjective 'pure'. Why does Jesus say we are already pure? *"Because of the word that I spoke to you"*. The word of Jesus is a love that is turned into

service. What is able to purify an individual is not that he washes his feet, but his availability to wash in turn others' feet. This message of Jesus, a love that becomes service, makes an individual pure.

According to that ancient mentality, God was situated in the sphere of holiness, of purity and only a pure one was allowed to get in touch with him. Well, a love that becomes service is the only true guarantee of being in touch with the Lord. Jesus repeats: *"Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me."* He insists on the fact that love that has been received has to be turned into love for others, otherwise the branch, namely the individual, is useless.

Then Jesus claims again his divine condition: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him"*, in this dynamic process of fusion with God – God only requires to be welcome in believer's life in order to expand his existence – *"will bear much fruit"*. The more we give life to others, the more we receive. We only have what we give. The more our life giving is great, unlimited, the more God's answer will be unlimited.

Then Jesus warns: *"Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither"*. This expression that is translated with 'wither', literally 'dries up', is taken from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapter 37, when he defines people like a *"valley of dry bones"*, meaning a people without Spirit. Well, anyone who does not remain in Jesus, anyone who receives this love and doesn't transmit it to others, dries up; we just have what we give to others. Here comes then the assurance by Jesus, that in our spoken language is quite misunderstood. We all know the expression *"Ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you"*, unfortunately we always forget the two necessary conditions that Jesus lays down:

- If you remain in me, that is if this love we received is turned into love for others
- If my words remain in you, that is his word remains as a real life orientation, leading to a life with is service to others

only at that time Jesus might state *"ask for whatever you want and i twill be done for you"*. Therefore, only being in agreement with the Lord, only when our life is fused with the one of God till becoming a unique life, we might ask the only gift we need: the Spirit, an even greater loving ability. For the Father will take care of the rest. He doesn't meet the needs of his sons, he just anticipates them. This really gives a great confidence.

And here comes the final: *"By this is my Father glorified"*. There was the idea of God to be glorified through extraordinary deeds, glorious magnificence. No, the only way of glorifying him, is practicing a love which resembles to his one, *"that you bear much fruit and become my disciples"*.

The only way to be sure we are glorifying God is by demonstrating forgiveness, mercy and a sharing ability that resemble to his same ones.