

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2024

My dear friends, today is the fifth Sunday of Easter and we continue to read from the Acts of the Apostles which tells us how the church began, the joys and the challenges it went through and how every misfortune turned out to be blessings in the end.

Today's Scripture selections emphasize the need for Christians to abide in Christ or to remain 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.

If you follow sports or better yet, if you've ever played them, you know that there are basically two kinds of players. And no - I'm not talking about good players and not-so-good players. I'm thinking about the quiet ones and the talkers. In my experience with soccer which I'm familiar with, some players simply go about their business on the field without hardly saying a word. They don't yell at referees. They don't taunt the other team. They don't brag before, during, or after a game. They just play hard and let their actions speak for themselves.

But some players never STOP talking. Before a game they babble on about how they are going to beat the other team, or make sure their listeners know how great they are. During games they scream at officials and sometimes even at players on their own team. And they continually

try to get in the “ear” of the opponent, “trash-talking” as it is often called. Now, some players are good enough to “back it up”, can perform at a level equal to the talk, can fulfill the promises and predictions they have made. And when that happens, the opponents are more likely to accept all the boasting and confidence and trash-talk. It’s the performance that garners the respect of the competition.

But if someone continually runs his mouth and doesn’t come through, doesn’t perform well, it’s a much different story, especially when they give a hundred excuses as to why it happened. In that case, the person looks kind of foolish and opponents have a really hard time respecting that person. That’s understandable. And when a person acts that way, we often think or say,

“Well, he sure TALKS a good game.”

Of course, what’s meant by that statement is that the words and the actions of that person don’t match, that what is said by that person doesn’t translate into their performance. The words are, in a very real sense, empty.

“Children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth.”

So says St. John in the opening line of our Second Reading. My dear friends in Christ, we must remember that, in the earliest days of Christianity, all they had was a great story to tell. And not just any story of course - the greatest story ever told. And for how incredible that story was, the words themselves would not be enough. What people would respond to was the DIFFERENCE that belief made in the lives of those first believers. It wouldn’t be okay to simply SAY the right things, SAY things that inspired people, SAY a message people needed to hear. No, for the Gospel message, for the Good News to be embraced by all who heard it proclaimed, they would need to also see it lived out, see a change in the way those first Christians lived, see the impact of their beliefs fleshed out in concrete ways.

St. John seems to have known that talking a good game would not be enough. Believers would have to “produce on the field”, they would have to “back up” their claims with tangible results, with day-to-day choices that showed others that their words weren’t simply that - words.

Fellow Catholics, don’t we often fall into that trap? Don’t we sometimes simply “talk” a good game?

It’s painful to consider that question honestly. I pray for people not to go hungry, but do I do anything to actually feed someone? I get up before this community and talk about the necessity of letting go of grudges and being forgiving people, but I know that I’m not quite as kind to some people who have hurt me. I say that all people are precious to God, yet often pre-judge people and come to conclusions about them before I even get to know them. I often talk about the importance of giving from our want and not just from our excess, yet in reality I don’t deny myself much. And I go on-and-on about how everything we do must be done out of love, yet know that my motives (toward almost everything) are mixed.

Yes, I talk a good game, but

I think the Gospel passage we just heard is familiar to us all. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. There is an intimate connection between us, a bond that sustains us, a closeness that is life-giving. This metaphor is summed up by Jesus in his beautiful words,

“Remain in me, as I remain in you.”

In the late 1980s, a fire destroyed a building on the lower East side of Manhattan. An alarm was sounded, and the trucks and personnel arrived in plenty of time to fight the fire. The exit doors worked properly. The steps were clear. The people got out of the building quickly and in order. However, the fire burned out of control and the building had to be demolished.

When the firemen arrived, the hoses on the wall were installed properly. There were hoses hundreds of feet in length—clearly sufficient to put the fire out. It was discovered too late, however, that the city water line had never been connected to this part of the system, a deadly oversight. — To live a human life disconnected from the living God is tragic as well. Jesus did more than come to live among us. He is the life-giving vine and we are the branches. We can find true peace in this life if we remain in him.

Remaining in Christ really gets at the heart of the matter. My dear friends, our faith teaches us some pretty incredible things. That God the Son became one of us. That God the Son died for us. That God the Son rose from the dead and is alive. But there is one more thing that is just as incredible. Our God doesn't just live "out there" somewhere. He lives in you and he lives in me.

And that makes all the difference in our world. Or at least it should. Let's make sure that our faith isn't just words, or aren't just beliefs that rattle around in our heads. Rather, let's make sure that our faith is a living faith, one that shapes the choices we make, one that allows the God in each of us be poured out into our world through every loving thing we do.

And no one will be able to say that we just talk a good game.

