

Easter V

Cycle B, 5.2.21

Acts 9:26-31/1 John 3:18-24/John 15:1-8

THE SHRIVELED BRANCH CAN STILL TEACH US A LESSON

There's a huge California Oak tree outside my dining room window that I enjoy every day. In fact, during this year of Covid confinement, that tree has been my constant companion because I've spent a lot of time using my dining room table as my desk.



That's where I set up my MacBook Air to respond to emails, prepare online Zoom liturgies, read online magazines, newspapers and articles, attend virtual meetings with staff, with parishioners, with Diocesan committees and my religious order, facilitate our Wednesday Town Hall gatherings, write a mid-week message to the parish, participate in seminars and continuing education opportunities, watch funny animal videos on Youtube and search the internet for resources and material for preaching, as well as staying in touch, as all of us have, with friends and family. Well, that gigantic oak tree down the hill outside my window has taught me an important

gospel lesson – the lesson that Jesus tried to teach his friends and followers in today's gospel.

All winter long the tree was bare – no leaves. That's what happens in the winter, not with all trees in California, but many of them. They lose their leaves. That's Mother Nature's little seasonal plot to let us know that winter is here and, later, when spring is on the way. Little by little, around April as the weather starts to change, tiny buds appear on the tree; at first you can hardly see them. Then, almost magically, they're visible and each day they grow larger. The all-brown skeleton of trunk and branches is starting to put on some clothes. Leaves begin to appear and cover every branch. Then, almost overnight, I look out and understand why the majestic California Oak is a protected species. The life-giving "stuff" inside the tree in communion with the earth generates a new season of growth. There it stands in all its glorious lush green splendor, as if it's showing off the power and glory of God, the Author of all Creation.



To describe spiritual growth, Jesus often turns to nature. In today's gospel he uses a figure that was familiar to the Jewish people – the figure of the vine and the

branches. Many times, Jewish scriptures pictured Israel as the vineyard of God, the Jewish people as branches of God's vine. Jesus speaks of himself as the "true vine."

We receive our spiritual life from communion with him. He gives us the injunction to live on in him. It's a process that involves pruning and trimming since only the humble can bear fruit in Christ. Jesus' secret was his contact with God; ours is contact with God through Jesus.

This is what happens when we share the Eucharist and why we eagerly look forward to being together again in person around the Lord's Table. In the Eucharist we receive the full reality of Jesus Christ into our bodies... not just our minds, our hearts, our souls...but our bodies. He is our food. He is our strength. He becomes part of us and we a part of him.



The Eucharist we share isn't just fellowship with other believers, as wonderful as that is. It isn't just remembering an important event that occurred centuries ago on a hill called Calvary. It's the Sacrifice of the Mass where the walls of time fall away and Christ, the eternal Word of God, again takes on human flesh in people like you and in me. Through the work of the Holy Spirit and in the Sacrament we receive, Christ comes to dwell with us and within us. We are part of him and he is part of us. So, yes, he is the

vine, we are the branches. We are his Body; he is our Blood.

That would be a good Gospel lesson I could take from that Oak tree outside my dining room window – the crucial communion between earth and tree. But the lesson isn't in its beauty and majesty. There's one branch on that tree – a very small branch – that has no green leaves on it. Brown, shriveled and completely out of place, it's dangling at the end of a larger branch – against the backdrop of all the rich green life surrounding it. I don't know what happened to that branch – whether a strong wind snapped it, or one of the five squirrels that live in my yard chewed on it. Whatever it was, it lost its connection to the rest of the tree. The central "plumbing system" in the tree, forming a network of tubes that carry water and minerals up from the roots in the earth to the leaves, and food from the leaves back down to the branches, trunk, and roots – that whole life system isn't working for that branch because it's no longer connected to the trunk.

I can't help but think about what's happening now in India because of the recent surge of the Coronavirus. Scenes of devastation there continue where the world's highest ever daily spike in new infections was recorded for a third consecutive day and hospitals fielding growing lines of desperate patients begged for the luxury of oxygen amid an all-out government push to provide it. Like the shriveled and dead branch on the oak tree, people are losing their lives because they can't be hooked up to an oxygen tank or a plastic IV-tube that would provide life-giving blood and healing medicines. In India, where the dead are not buried but cremated on a funeral pyre, the country is running out of wood for the cremation

ritual. Our gospel scene about the withered branch takes on an ominous accuracy: *People will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned.*



I've been trying to figure out how I can get down the hillside and cut off that shriveled branch. It looks so out of place in comparison with the rest of the tree and it's spoiling the picture-perfect scene of a tree in full bloom. It will be there all summer as a sign that things aren't perfect, that all systems are not running smoothly, that the tree can survive even if one branch didn't thrive. There's an incompleteness to our lives -- things that are out of sync, off-center, misplaced or misconstrued. We are always a "work in progress, a Church in progress, a world in progress." That's hard to accept and yet it's the human condition. I'll let that bruised and broken branch remind me of the spiritual and human wisdom in David Richo's insightful book: *Five True Things* and his advice on how to find courage and contentment when we face the broken branches in our world and in our own lives. Rather than fighting against them, we all must accept these five true things: (1) everything changes and ends, (2) things do not always go according to plan, (3) life is not always fair, (4) pain is part of life, and (5) people are not loving and loyal all the time.



When we learn to accept life on its own terms, we no longer have to shake our fist at the heavens. We can say "yes" to life as it is and follow the instructions we heard in the reading from St. John: *Let us love not in word and speech, but in deed and truth... God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.* Trusting in God's will for our ultimate good we can pray the original serenity prayer that brings peace to many people, composed by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932:

***Father, give us courage
to change what must be altered,
serenity to accept what cannot be helped,
and the insight to know
the one from the other***

John Kasper, OSFS