

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Fifth Sunday of Easter

First reading:

*Paul's Fearless Proclamation
(Acts 9.26-31)*

This reading gives the first news that we have had that the Church has spread beyond Jerusalem.

Paul has received his vision of the Risen Christ and has joined the disciples, being baptized at Damascus. Then, according to his letters, he went off to Arabia for three years before going up to Jerusalem. Paul's arguing with the Hellenists (or Greeks) is a foretaste of his bringing the gospel to those beyond the borders of Judaism.

His fearless proclamation of the gospel message, both in Damascus and in Jerusalem, is a characteristic of the work of the early missionaries. We have already come across it in the fearless proclamation of the message by Peter before the Jewish authorities. It will continue throughout the Acts of the Apostles, even till the end, when we see Paul proclaiming the message during his captivity in Rome.

How are we to spread the gospel fearlessly? Perhaps mostly by sticking up for Christian principles in moral behaviour, such as the protection of life, the rights of the poor and disadvantaged, fearlessly facing the issues of justice, war and peace, and sexual morality. But it must also be a proclamation in love and peace.

Question:

Have we any causes for fear in making our proclamation of Christ??

Second reading:

*The Two Commandments
(1 John 3.18-24)*

These two commandments will dominate the rest of the letter. They are not exactly the classic two commandments of the Law, reiterated by Jesus: to love God above all and our neighbour as ourselves.

The two commandments of God here are, first, to believe in the power or name of the Risen Christ, and, second, to love one another. One might say that belief in the power of the Risen Christ is an application of love for God, an aspect that is especially relevant during Eastertide.

The saving power of Christ flows out from God's care for ourselves, and belief in it must both be a response in love and also provoke love and gratitude. It must also make us fearless before God, full of the love that casts out fear, since the power of Christ's Resurrection is a guarantee of God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice for us. It saves us from our own sin and disobedience.

It brings also fearlessness before a hostile world, with the fearlessness of which we heard in Paul's preaching in the first reading. It must also inspire fulfilment of the second commandment, love of neighbour. Such belief, issuing in love, forms the criterion for knowing that the Spirit is dwelling within us.

Question:

What does real love of neighbour involve?

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Gospel

(John 15.1-8)

The True Vine

A vine is an extraordinary plant. It can grow to a huge size, spreading over a huge area, a whole garden wall or trellis work, from one single root, and produces a rich sap that yields grapes at the end of countless little branches. And then there is the business of pruning: cut it back thoroughly on all its many shoots and tendrils, and it seems only more determined to grow thick and strong.

So, the vine was the symbol of Israel, drawing from the Lord a sap that penetrated to all its shoots, and lovingly pruned by the gardener in a way that best encouraged its growth. The image was taken over by Jesus for his own community, the new Israel. Pairing with last week's picture of the good shepherd, it is one of the greatest of John's images.

It perfectly sums up the two emphases of today's other two readings. The only source of fruitful energy for the Christian is union with and dependence on the life flowing from Christ. Without that, the branches wither and die; a trimming cut off from a vine no longer has any chance of life. The vine itself at pruning season looks stark, rough and suffering. It is, in fact, bursting with new life.

Question:

Have I benefited from the vinedresser's pruning knife?
