

EATER – B – OLPH 2012
- THE TRUE VINE -
(Acts 9:26-31; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8)

In last Sunday's gospel reading, Jesus was the **Good Shepherd** and we were the sheep. Today's image expresses an even closer relationship: a **vine and its branches**. This is so close a relationship that you could say it is beyond relationship; it expresses **identification**. "I am the vine...you are the branches." But a vine is all branches! It is not like a tree or a big shrub where you have a substantial trunk and a profusion of branches. The vine is just branches. Thus Jesus identifies himself with us. It is obvious that a branch cut off from the vine will wither. Not only is the branch destroyed but the vine itself is diminished. To destroy a branch is to destroy the vine in some measure; to cut off a brother or sister in Christ is to cut off Christ.

This is a difficult parable for us because of our modern **idea of freedom**. As Blessed Pope John Paul II pointed out, modern day people consider freedom to mean **independence** - the ability to do whatever they want, whenever they want - with no external constraints. There is, of course, some truth in this view of freedom: none of us should impose unnecessary restraints on others. However, limitations are imposed on us in many different ways. There are firstly our **civil laws**. See how far you would get when a police officer stops you for speeding. An excuse of 'no one can impact on my freedom to do what I want' just won't do. There are the laws of common decency, although they have broken down to a great extent. There are things we just will not tolerate or allow in public. Nevertheless, this view of unconstrained and total freedom does not get to the heart of the human person. For us, as Christians, freedom means becoming the person we are meant to be.

Someone might say, "I earned my money and I am going to spend it any way I wish. If I want to go out gambling, I am free to do that. If I want to take drugs or watch pornography, I will do that." Such a person is not truly free, but a slave to desires and addictions. C.S. Lewis said: "We are not made for equality. We are made for obedience and worship." A branch is not equal to the vine even though they share a similar nature. A child before - and after - birth is not equal to the mother, even though they share the same human nature. It is true that as we mature, we achieve a certain degree of independence. Still, no one ever becomes totally independent. The illusion of independence is easily

broken by an illness or some misfortune. The truth is that as we realize our true selves, we recognize a deeper dependence - on our fellow human beings and on Jesus our Lord.

Now in the past I used to be put off by the idea of **being pruned**. I don't suppose any of us likes the idea of being chopped off and thrown into the fire to be burnt. It seems to be a bit brutal and harsh and uncompromising. But on more mature reflection I came to realize that this pruning is really about **focusing** and directing the energy of the vine to make it more productive. The vinedresser cuts away withered and diseased twigs and makes sure that each branch has the optimum number of buds to produce the maximum crop. He also shapes the plant so that the grapes have room to grow and to enable them to be harvested easily.

I'm no gardener but I realize that **pruning** correctly is a skilled job; you have to know what you are doing. Someone inexperienced could do quite a lot of damage, and may even kill the plant. But here we are in expert hands because the vinedresser is none other than our Heavenly Father, the one who created us for a very specific destiny. The pruning is necessary to make sure we achieve this destiny.

If we just had the image of the vine without the pruning then it would be easy to think that this talk of "I am the vine, you are the branches" implies that we can have a cozy intimate relationship with Jesus that nothing can threaten. It requires no changes on our part because Jesus will do everything for us that is needed.

Introducing the concept of pruning stresses that change is an inevitable and necessary part of the life of a Christian. It obliges us to recognize that there are aspects of our life that are incompatible with the life of a Christian and need to be pruned and let go.

The image of Jesus as the stock or main life-giving trunk of the vine and we as the branches who draw on him for everything we need is a good one. It is when we go it alone, when fail to draw nourishment from him or go in the wrong direction that we need pruning or redirecting.

This happens through the intervention of the Father represented in the parable as the vinedresser. He achieves this through his many subtle promptings as we go through our lives. For example, in quiet moments of prayer we might be given an insight about some attitude or aspect of our behaviour that pricks our conscience and makes us realize that change is necessary. Or it might be that someone says something to us which makes us reflect on how badly we have treated them. Or we might overhear something which gives us a glimpse of how we are negatively perceived by others. There

are many such moments sent our way by the Father, the test is whether we notice them, whether we make the necessary changes.

The main thing to realize is that this chapter of John's Gospel is **all about love**. We do indeed have a close and intimate relationship with Christ; he wants us to be completely one with him. This is what motivates him and it is what should motivate us. This is what love actually means –becoming one with another.

Our greatest desire should be to draw so close to Jesus that we intimately share in his wonderful life, so that our every word and action flows from this relationship. Then all that we do and all that we say will give him glory and be a sign for the world of the greatness of God's love for the whole of humanity.