

## Homily of Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, 2024

Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22:26-28, 30-32; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

The first reading tells us about St. Paul's experience after his conversion. He had escaped from Damascus where the Jews wanted to kill him for preaching and "proving that [Jesus] is the Messiah" (Acts 9:20-25). He arrived in Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples, "but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple." Then, Barnabas brought St. Paul to the apostles and told them the story of St. Paul's conversion. The apostles accepted him, which enabled him to move "about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:27-28).

First, St. Paul was a notorious persecutor and murderer of Christians. When he converted, he was able to put his past life behind him and never allowed the guilt and shame of his past life to discourage him from answering the call of discipleship. Sometimes, God wants to do new things in our life, but we refuse to cooperate with God's grace by letting ourselves become trapped in our ugly past life. St. Paul's ability to break with his ugly past life challenges us to break the chains and yokes of our ugly past life and liberate ourselves from them. The word of God says in Isaiah 43:18-19, "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not. See, I am doing something new!" Let us embrace the new things God is doing and move forward.

Secondly, Barnabas intervened in St. Paul's situation and became an instrument for St. Paul's acceptance by the apostles. Let us not be like the Jews who wanted to kill St. Paul because he was no longer a member of their murderous gang, or like the disciples who refused to accept him because they were afraid of him. Perhaps we are the 'Barnabas' God wants to use to help someone. Let us not be reluctant to help or refuse to help. St. John urges us in the second reading, "[God's] commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23).

St. Paul says in Colossians 3:13, "Put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, to bear with one another and forgive whenever there is any opportunity to do so. As the Lord has forgiven you, forgive one another." Let no one be a stumbling block to opportunities of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and unity. The apostles teach us to give one another the opportunity and the benefit of the doubt to prove their new life. God is patient with us. He forgives us and gives us opportunities to live new life. We must do the same to one another.

God is not "unbelieving" in us as we are, sometimes, unbelieving in one another. Think of what would have happened to the prodigal son if the father was unbelieving in him? Think of what would have happened to the woman caught in adultery if Jesus was unbelieving in her? Think of what would have happened to Zacchaeus if Jesus was unbelieving in him? And many others. Let us not dismiss gestures of contrition. They are opportunities for reconciliation and restoration.

Thirdly, St. Paul is a fulfillment of today's gospel reading. When he was outside Jesus, he was possessed by the spirits of hate, jealousy, fury, persecution, murder, and so on. But when he was grafted to Jesus, the true vine, and was pruned of his vices, he began to bear much fruit. Jesus says in the gospel, "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" (John 15:4-5).

In the same way, like St. Paul, when we are grafted to Jesus, we receive 'spiritual antitoxin' and 'spiritual antivirus' against infections and corruptions of the world and the Evil One. Then, we are flushed off and pruned of our sins and we can bear fruits of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus says, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (John 15:7-8).

May it be so for you and for me, through Christ our Risen Lord. Amen.

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