

## Bishop's Reflection – Fifth Sunday of Easter

"I am the vine, you are the branches." No one is an island unto him/herself. We all draw strength for something, whatever that may be. As Christians we are part of something much greater than ourselves, but just as the tree is often identified by the health of its fruit and branches, so often the world is looking at us for the One who motivates and feeds us.

God doesn't leave things to chance. Jesus speaks of the Father as the vine grower who prunes each branch to make it bear much fruit. None of us likes to be cut back or restricted from growing in one direction and, yet, that is often what happens. Sometimes we are transplanted (or grafted) to a whole new region, a whole new culture, a whole new lifestyle; we mourn what was lost, but draw on God's strength to help us follow him.

I once knew a Master Grafter. He would take branches from a variety of trees and graft them unto the trunk of a new one. In his yard, different varieties of apples, pears and related fruits grew on the same tree. We are often afraid to lose our individuality. We purposefully remain disconnected from God, fearing that we will become cookie-cutter images, indistinguishable one from the other. How false an idea, spread by the devil himself. Though part of God's overall design, each one of us bears God's eternal fruit in his/her own way.

How are we to discern the fruit that comes from God? How do we recognize it in ourselves and in others? It has three distinctive qualities: faith, hope and love.

Faith in God and in the goodness of what God has made; faith gives us the ability to remain connected, to abide in God and with others, to persevere. I can only marvel at the many millions who choose to remain connected with, and have faith in, "The Community of Believers", despite its human pitfalls. I, for one, draw great strength from the faith of those who believe, and pray that it may only get stronger.

Hope in something greater than oneself and the goals we put before us. The fruit of hope is often evidenced in times of struggle and suffering, when the comforts of earthly life begin to fail. So many give up when all hope seems past. Jesus is able to look beyond the cross, its sufferings and its shame. His hope wasn't just in what the Father and Spirit would do, but in the transformed lives of his disciples and the power of love and forgiveness.

Love that goes beyond human conventions, reflecting the love of God. The various excerpts we have been reading from the First Letter of John, during the Easter Season, have much to say on the nature of love, so does Jesus' command in John's Gospel, to "Love one another as I have loved you." Love is often perfected in the crucible of self-gift, and is most evident in the work of forgiveness and healing.

The conversion of St. Paul is presented in today's First Reading as an example of someone who was grafted to Christ at a most unexpected time and in a most unconventional way. His journey, and the struggles he endured, are examples of how God prunes us for growth. In today's Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul travels to Jerusalem with Barnabas. Understandably, the Church wants nothing to do with him. Though grafted unto Christ, the Church is hesitant to deal with a man who, not many days earlier, was out to destroy them. Barnabas becomes Paul's lifesaver, an ideal sponsor, who presents Paul to them. St. Paul is able to allay their fears by his fearless proclamation to the people of Jerusalem and his willingness to endure great danger for doing so. How has the image of the vine and the branches been evident in your life?