

Gospel of John - episode 31

Chapter 15 part 2

Welcome to our Reflection on St. John's Gospel. We now begin Chapter 15 with the mystery of the Vine and its Branches. I want to read a couple of verses to start our discussion: "I am the true Vine", Jesus said, "and my Father is the Vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit, he cuts away. Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes to make it even bear more fruit". Then he said, "You are pruned already by means of the Word that I have spoken to you. Make your home in me as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the Vine, neither can you unless you remain in me".

Let's see what we can do with this. If God the Father is the Vinedresser, it means that God the Father is the organiser and the director of this new community that Jesus is putting together. He is the one who sees to the health of the whole organism, and he makes sure that the branches are fruit bearing, because anyone taking care of a Vine would be foolish to neglect the health of the branches.

Pruning is a necessary part of keeping the plant healthy. Pruning has to be continuous for the Vine. A withered branch is useless, so it will be cut off to protect the rest of the plant. What you might not realise is that this is John's way of explaining how it is that Judas is no longer with them! Judas was a dead branch, and so he's cut off from the Vine. John has a wonderful way of saying it without mentioning the name. Of course, that will be the reality with anybody else who cuts themselves off from the Vine also - they will be dead branches and utterly useless. John will explain in 1 John 2:19- that others will go the way of Judas also. So, when you look at the pruning and cutting off, there's really very little choice for us as members of this Vine. You must either be cut back if you're healthy or cut off if you're dead and withered. The cutting is there all the time.

Anyone who has a vibrant relationship with God - who has a vibrant prayer life - knows that purification is continuous. It stops when the Lord considers you finished and ready for heaven, and he takes you with him. The purification goes on in the individual, and in the church as a whole. Sometimes persecutions happen in one part of the church and not in another; that is the pruning of the Vine in that area. We must ask then, are we going to allow ourselves to be pruned so that we can remain as healthy branches? Looking at the Vine we can see that the branch has no life by itself: "without me, you can do nothing", he will say in a moment. The branch cannot survive on its own. It can only survive by being attached to the Vine and by having the life of the Vine running through it. This is why we don't get this parable until all the teaching of Chapter 13 and Chapter 14 has been given, when we realise our desperate need for the Lord.

We saw in the first part of the Gospel that Jesus is the source of life. He taught us that himself in Chapter 5:21-26. He illustrated it in the raising of Lazarus in Chapter 11, and he has told us in chapter 14:6. We are totally dependent on Jesus for life because John told us in chapter 1: 4, 12, and 16, that he is the source of life. Jesus is the source of life. There's no way we can have any spiritual life without him. We are as dependent on Jesus for spiritual life as the branch is on the parent plant. There's no way it can



survive without that reception of life, and that reception of life has to be continuous. If the sap stops at any point, then that branch will die. It will begin to wither immediately. Cut off from the sap, of course, it has no chance at all. So, the cutting off of the dead branch is John's way of speaking about judgement but the cutting off of the branch is to try and keep the rest of the plant healthy and alive.

Now, you see a graphic example of this in Chapter 5 of the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter deals very strongly with Ananias and Saphira; he's not going to allow lies and deceit get into the church, so he makes sure that these branches are cut off. In the text they are said to be dead, but they are dead spiritually - the branch is cut off from the Vine. Peter is very decisive about that. He won't tolerate it. Jesus is the one who calls us into life, yet if we lack the nourishment that he gives us in his Word, Eucharist and prayer, there's no way that we can survive. But if we stay in communion with him, as described in chapters 13 and 14 in this mutual indwelling, then he will sustain us in life daily. He will feed us with his grace, Eucharist and with his Word continuously. We must be open to God feeding us, just as the plants are open for the sun to feed them through photosynthesis. They are open to the rain to keep them alive also, and to the nourishment in the soil to keep them alive. If not, they die.

Our total dependence on God is emphasised at the beginning of this chapter. Looking at the pruning process in 15:2-3 God prunes to make sure we bear fruit, also to produce better fruit, and stay healthy. Well, any gardener can talk about that and understand it. We were told by Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah, that 'old Israel' eventually became a degenerate plant. Why? Because she began looking to the Cosmos, the unbelieving world, for her life. So, the Vine had to be torn down in AD 70 because the wood is useless. The real Vine will bear fruit because **we** are not any better than the people of Israel. We have exactly the same nature as them, so if we are unredeemed, we have the same problems also. But the reason why this particular Vine will bear fruit is because it's Jesus's Mystical Body.

He IS the Vine. We are simply part of him. It is he who will bear the fruit. He is the source of our life in the Eucharist and in the Holy scriptures, and in sending us his Spirit to guide us in the personal daily life also. So, notice that it is healthy branches that are pruned. One of the signs that we're actually making some progress in our relationship with God is the fact that the Lord thinks we're worth pruning! Now, if we go back to Chapter 13:10, during the washing of the feet Jesus told his disciples that some of them were already cleansed. The Word that John uses for 'cleansing' is the same word for 'pruning'. So, pruning and cleansing are the same process. In modern times, we're inclined not to use the word pruning, but to use the word 'purification' - which is cleansing, and that goes on all the time. So, we have had it repeated over and over in chapters 13 and 14, that to have this pruning going on in our lives - this continuous cleansing - we must internalise God's Word.

There's a very important verse in Hebrews 4:12, which says that "the Word of God is alive and active. It cuts like any double-edged sword. It gets through to the place that divides the soul from the Spirit and joints from the marrow. No created thing can hide from the one before whom they will give an account of themselves". This is an extremely important statement about the scriptures. When we come to the Word of God, it exposes what we are and what state we are in. That's why sometimes when we read the scriptures we will feel very uncomfortable. Other times we feel consoled when we've allowed the Lord to

work with us and we've moved on. The times when we feel uncomfortable with a particular text is the time when the Lord, the Holy Spirit, is saying to us 'that text is not alive in you. it needs to be internalised in you. It needs to change you. You need to change to become like what God is saying'. So, the internalising of the Word is the cleansing process, because Jesus had said to the eleven Apostles who were faithful to him, that it was his own preaching of the Word that had changed them to whatever extent they had been changed from the beginning.

So, we see that our spiritual growth can only take place as we adjust ourselves to the Word of God. We must never, ever be tempted to adjust the Word of God to us! That would be a complete disaster. But that is the temptation of the modern world - to compromise with things that are going on in the world today and standards that the world wants us to accept - to change the Word of God to suit that would be a complete disaster. It would mean that none of us could grow. We have to allow the Word to bring us to where God wants to take us. That is why Jesus said that "you've got to make your home in me, and I have to make my home in you".

Well, we know from the letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 12:14, that "nothing unholy or unworthy can enter the Presence of God". You can't change that! So, if there's something unholy or unworthy in me, and the Lord wants to make his home in me, that unworthy thing has got to be pruned. It's got to go. That's not a statement about me. It's a statement about this thing that needs to change. It's a statement about Who It Is who wants to make his home in me. If the living, Holy God wants to come and tabernacle in me, he won't come into an unholy place. So, this pruning process is extremely important. To have this mutual indwelling that I can dwell in Him and the Holy One can dwell in me, there must be a huge amount of cleansing, purification and sanctification taking place in me so that I can become a fruitful branch of that Vine.

When the church declares somebody a blessed, a servant of God or a saint, she is saying, 'we know that they were fruitful branches of the Vine. We're declaring it to everybody that they were'. What we need to grasp in our own lives is that this mutual abiding of the Holy One in me and my living in the Holy One releases the divine life to flow continuously in me and through me. That continuous inflow of divine life into me can go out from me to others. So, when that happens to each member of the church, the church is totally the life centre of the world, where God's life and healing goes out to the world. That's why you read when you go to the Book of Revelation, Chapter 22 that the saints are the trees growing by the river of life in Paradise where even their leaves are medicinal for others - let alone the whole tree or the branch bearing fruit. So that is extremely important for us.

We now come to this very powerful, extremely important statement that Jesus makes in John 15:5. "As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the Vine, neither can you unless you remain in me". Another way of translating that is "without me, you can do nothing". I presume, like myself, you've proven that true! Many people forget to call the Lord into their actions; they do them in their own strength and their own puny power. You can do nothing spiritual that way, but you can do a lot of damage. So, let's see what we can't do without him, without Jesus, on our own, leaning on pure nature. Without grace and without this divine love flowing into us and through us, we cannot have a spiritual life. We cannot have

this mutual abiding. It's not possible. We cannot have the outpouring of the Holy Spirit flowing into us. We end up completely useless for building up the Body of Christ and the mission of the Lord. If you look back at Psalm 127:1-2, 'You labour in vain if you build without the Lord'. The Psalmist was completely clear about that. So, all our attempts to do things in our own strength is completely wasted time and energy.

So, let us come back to living this vibrant spiritual life with him. Jesus says, and this in 15:5 "I am the Vine, and you are my branches. Whoever remains in me" - that is, you remain in this mutual indwelling and with this vibrant spiritual life. "If you remain in me and I can remain in you, you will bear fruit in plenty, but cut off from me, you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me" - that is by their own free decision, because one of the greatest gifts given to us is free will. You can say no to God and to this wonderful life. You might not say no verbally, but you'll say no by your actions – "anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that's thrown away, he withers. And these branches are collected and thrown on the fire, and they are burnt".

Now, here John picks up something that you will get in the parables of St. Matthew, that when it comes to the time of judgement, the wheat and the darnel are separated. The good and the bad fish are separated, and what is bad is thrown on the fire - which represents Hell. Sometimes, Matthew says "weeping and gnashing of teeth" which is the total frustration of your being. But here we've already looked at the fact from Ezekiel that the wood of the vine is utterly useless. You can't build or make anything with it. It's only useful to be burnt. So, if this plant has not been fruit bearing, then it is no use to anyone. That is the end time aspect of looking at this. The branches will be thrown on the fire.

But let's come back now to the fruitful branches. "But if you remain in me", Jesus said, "and my Words remain in you". Now, 'my Words' is the whole revelation that Jesus has given in the Gospels. "If my Words remain in you, you can ask for what you want, and you will get it". So, let's look at the subject of answered prayer. One of the things that Christians are very concerned about is that their prayers are heard and answered. Now, God hears everything, but Jesus tells us how you can have prayers actually answered. Have you noticed that you can ask a holy person to pray, and something will happen. Another person can ask, and apparently nothing happens. The difference is the relationship that these people have with God. So, the '**if clause**' comes in. If You remain in me, **if** this mutual, abiding, vibrant, spiritual reality is in you, and your communion with God is alive and well. If that is so, **if** the Holy Spirit is actively enlightening and guiding you, which is His duty inside of you, **if** that is happening, then your prayer life will be fruitful. It will actually bear fruit. Why is that? It is because the Holy Spirit will guide you to choose the Will of God, to choose what God considers important, and therefore, you will be asking God for things that He wants to give us. Selfish prayer, the me, me, me prayer is unthinkable. We've gone miles beyond that in the second half of the Gospel. We've put 'the self' in its place, and we've allowed love to grow in us. The privilege we have is expressing God's will to be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Thank you for listening. Goodbye. God bless you.



INTERVAL

Welcome to our sharing on John Chapter 15: 9. We come to one of the greatest statements in the Gospels with regard to our relationship with God. It's a most wonderful thing. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love". Jesus taught in Chapter 13:34 that we are to love one another in the same way as he loved us. So, adding that statement to this one here in 15:9 we get the pattern of our relationship with God - that Jesus invites us into a Trinitarian experience. What Jesus said is that the Father poured himself out infinitely, absolutely, unconditionally on his Son, Jesus. Here Jesus says "just as the Father has done that for me, that is exactly what I'm doing for you; I'm pouring myself out absolutely, fully, completely, totally, sacrificially, unconditionally, fully on you!

So, there you have the love that's coming to us directly from Heaven. The Father loves his Son, and the Son loves us. That is the way that God loves me, but I'm not alone on the planet. Jesus says exactly the same thing to my neighbour: as the Father has poured himself out fully on Jesus so He's pouring himself out fully on my neighbour also to my right and left. So, I've made a complete triangle because God loves these neighbours exactly as he loves me, infinitely, absolutely, unconditionally, eternally. That is why Jesus was able to say in chapter 13 that this is the way you are to love one another, because if divine love is coming to you, you can give that divine love to other people. If that divine love isn't coming to you, you don't have the ability or the power to give it to somebody else. This is why the church is nestled in the love of the Three Divine Persons, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit indwelling us. This is the source of her survival for 2,000 years.

This is why she has been able to give life to the world against all the odds and against all the opposition and persecution coming against her. It's because of this extraordinary mystery - because the relationship between the Father and the Son is the model for the relationship between Jesus and each one of us individually. The relationship between Jesus and each soul is the model of the relationship between the members of the Church. So, we know exactly what is actually going on, and we know the extraordinary power of it. The church is nestled in the arms of the Three Divine Persons, and that is why the world cannot destroy her. It's not that we're any better than anybody else. It's that we have this extraordinary privilege.

Now I'm going to bring you deeper into this wonderful chapter. First of all - just to introduce it - I want to say that in 15:5, we were told as branches that we receive the life from God through the Three Divine Persons. In 15:8 as disciples, we follow Jesus in this wonderful relationship with God. Now we come to the point where Jesus says, 'As my friends, you can commune with God'. So, we start off as branches, then progress to become disciples, and now we are transformed into friends. We can look at it from another angle, and that is we have extraordinary privileges given to us. In 15:7 we were told we could have effectual prayer. This is because of this divine love that's being poured into us through the Three Divine Persons, that in our living of this union and communion with the Most Holy Trinity, of course, our prayer will have effect. It will go out to others, not because of us, but because of **Who it is** that we're

dealing with. The One we deal with and we ask to heal our brothers and sisters, is the One who wants to do it anyway, but he wants to do it by the request of his church. So, we have effectual prayer.

We now deal with yet another great privilege; that is that in spite of all the persecutions of the world, in spite of our own struggles and our own weaknesses, he gives us celestial joy in the depths of our being. That celestial joy is there regardless of whether you are sick or well, being persecuted or everything is going fine for you. **It's his gift!** It's one of the things that you can recognise in somebody who really knows the Lord. Then he's going to tell us that not only will we bear fruit, but we will bear perpetual fruit. (I will show you this as we go on into chapter 16). The church has survived 2,000 years. The fruit has been continuous in spite of all the odds. But that's not all. Jesus brings us from being disciples to friends. He brings us into the extraordinary position of being God's friends and prophets - people who can speak for him, his ambassadors, his personal representatives. We have all of these privileges given to us, and all we've got to do is remain in that embrace of the Blessed Trinity, remain in that living, vibrant relationship with Them. It's not difficult.

So, to come back to 15:9, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you". You've heard me say over and over again, It's all about love, because God is love. The only way to conquer the Earth is through love. You can see, just by listening to your radio or looking at the television how badly the world gets it wrong. The world thinks that you conquer through arms and violence. The only way to conquer this Earth is through love. There is no other way. The reason for that is that God, our Creator, **Is Love**. We were made for love, and the only thing that makes human beings surrender is love. It's all about love. If we don't get this message about love, we have not got the Christian message at all! Love is the essence of everything. If we're in this vibrant, living relationship with the Blessed Trinity, of course we will bear fruit. Now, what is the fruit? **Love is the first one, Joy the second and Peace the third one.** The fruits of the Spirit are Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, which Paul lists in Galatians 5:22.

So, it's a particular love because the unbelievers will tell you that they know about love. What they call love and what the scriptures call love, are entirely different realities. One of the problems we have with regard to love is simply language. In the English language, we only have one word for love, and it covers everything. That makes life difficult in trying to understand it. The Greek language has 3 words to describe three different types of love. The highest form of love is **agape**: this is divine love; unconditional, sacrificial love. To talk about the love of friendship they will use the word **philus**. It's a completely different thing altogether. When Jesus speaks about love he refers to agape love, divine love, unconditional love; love that sacrifices itself to give life for others. This is not a love that draws something to itself. This love wants to give. This love wants to create. This love wants to make others alive and well. It's totally self-giving. Mothers learn this love once they give birth. They have to give totally to a little one who is completely dependent upon them.

So, we have to learn that this love belongs to the realm of above. It's only the people who will allow the Lord to lift them up onto this level of above - this truly spiritual level - who will be able to be the healers of the world, who will be able to be the people who will reconcile others and therefore, be able to do the works that Jesus wants us to do. Those who remain on the level of below, the worldly level, whatever they can produce is ephemeral; it's passing, worldly and won't last. They don't leave their footprints in the

sands of time. But the people who get into the spiritual fruits, yes, they're the ones who are remembered forever. Take one example, that of St. Francis of Assisi who lived nearly 800 years ago. He is alive in the memory of the Church now as he was then. His mission is continued by thousands of others! That's fruit. That's Spiritual fruit. That's fruit of lasting value. It is the same with all the other saints also.

Now, one of the things about this agape love is that it comes from God. It is divine. It is literally born of God. Christians are born of God in Baptism. This divine love is poured into them, so, if we allow this divine love to develop in us we will reach our full spiritual potential. We are told that it flows from the Father through the Son to us. Everything comes to us through Jesus, with him and in him. It is through this agape love, this divine love, this unconditional love, that God created the world. He brought everything into being. He wanted so many other creatures to share his life. For Him it is total giving, continuous generosity. It was divine love that became Incarnate and paid a hellish price to save us all. Love is the meaning of everything.

Here we are moving into the fact that it is divine love coming to us now through the Holy Spirit that will sanctify the world and will reorder it according to God's original plan. We call God's original plan Paradise, simply because everything was right. It will be made right again in the new Jerusalem, in the new era of the divine Holiness. When it is made right again the world will appreciate the love of God, and God will be able to walk the Earth as He did at the time Adam. All we have to do to let this wonderful thing happen is to remain in that relationship. That's why Jesus says, **Remain in me**. So, let's pick this up now at the end of verse 9. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love". That is the only condition. He's not asking much of us.

Then in 15:10, Jesus says, "If you keep my Commandments, you will remain in my love". Now, we've already dealt with keeping the Commandments, but since it is mentioned here again, we will mention it also. Jesus gave us only one commandment. He said, "this is my commandment that you love one another". Love is everything in Christianity, absolutely everything. If love dies, then the church is dead. The Book of Revelation Chapter 2, takes us to the church in Ephesus, where it had lost its first love. It was told that it was dead, that it wouldn't survive. Go to Ephesus today: all you have is Muslims; there are no Christians! There isn't a Christian church. If there is love, the church is alive. If there's no love, the church dies because **God is love**.

So, 'remain in my love and keep my Commandments'. We've already said that keeping the Commandments means internalising the Word of God and living by the Word of God. Jesus is a master teacher; he knows that the pupils don't get the message every time. If you only say something once, they don't get it. Parents understand this also. A parent in frustration can say to a child, 'but I've told you that five times already', but the child hasn't internalised it the first four times. Maybe on the fifth time, the child will take it. So, a teacher knows they have to repeat a message over and over again. At some point, the heart will open and the person will receive.

In 15:10 Jesus says, "If you could keep my Commandments you will remain in my love". In other words, the Word of God has to be alive in our hearts. The love of God has to be alive in our hearts. The

relationship with the Most Holy Trinity must be a daily living reality, not a doctrine in a book. If it's a doctrine you're dead. Jesus says "you will remain in my love just as I kept my Father's Commandments, and I remained in his love". He is offering himself as the model for us. In the first half of the Gospel Jesus often says, "I only reveal this because my Father tells me to reveal it. I only say this because my Father tells me to say it. The Father and I are one. I want the world to know that I love the Father, and therefore, I do exactly what my Father tells me". That was his expression of obedience.

Obedience is a response of love to love. Obedience doesn't say 'I have to do that because I'm forced to do it, or I'm ordered to do it'. That's not obedience. The real obedience that the Lord speaks about is that we surrender in love to love so that the Divine Will is done on Earth as it is in heaven. So, it means internalising the Word of God and letting go of this poor old ego self so that Divine Love can be born in us. Death and resurrection goes on in us all the time. Now, Saint Paul's letters to Ephesians, Chapter 4, Colossians, Chapter 3:5-17 gives a wonderful commentary on this. You can look those texts up; I'm staying with John here. So, what is the result of all of us living in this vibrant one-on-one relationship with the most Holy Trinity? It is that we are transformed, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, to become like the one we worship. So, we become little miniature 'I am' in **THE GREAT 'I AM'**.

Now, to explain that in a non-theological way to you, we say that a child is the image of his mother or father, or both; you can see the parent in the child. The likeness is so great. That is what I mean by 'we become a little I am in the Great I AM - because we become love in the Great Love. Since we are very small in our spiritual capacity, I call it the little I am in the great I am. That's a bit like saying, I put a cup into the ocean. The cup is full of that ocean water, yet there's all the ocean out there unaffected by that! But the cup is full of water. So, when we reach the fullness of love, then we are like **THE ONE**, and love has found a home on Earth. That's actually an extremely important. Now, love doesn't come by itself.

Anyone who truly loves knows the extraordinary gift of joy, so, let's introduce joy in 15:11. "I have told you this", Jesus said, "so that my joy may be in you and your joy be complete". Your joy being complete is that your cup is full. Whatever your capacity is, that your cup will be full. This joy is very special; it is celestial joy, independent of external circumstances. You could be suffering and still have this joy. If you look at saints like Padre Pio and other victim souls who have suffered much for the Lord, who willingly participate in the redemption of the world, yet they have this great joy in their hearts. But you can see it in ordinary people as well. This celestial joy is one of the signs that we really have this vibrant relationship. But the celestial joy is also interior strength. Nehemiah said that "the joy of the Lord is my strength" This is an amazing interior strength that is given to us. It's this joy of the Lord that enables people to lay down their lives for Christ in martyrdom. Now, this is not a felt joy in your body. It's something much deeper than that. It belongs to the level of the spirit. That's why I say it's in your deepest interior that you experience this joy. So, the joy of the Lord IS my strength.

You find you have the ability to do things that naturally you wouldn't be able to do. You can endure trials that you couldn't naturally endure. That's this interior joy. Now, when the joy is coupled with love, then you're on a winner. Then you're on the road to truly conquering the self, the world and the enemy. You will have victory. We'll continue this reflection again.



Thank you for listening. God bless you.