

V EASTER Sunday (May 3) homily on Jn 15: 1-8

Introduction: Today's Scripture selections emphasize the need for Christians to abide in Christ as a condition for producing fruits of kindness, mercy, charity and holiness.

Scripture lessons: The first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, testifies to the abundance of spiritual fruits yielded by the apostles because of their close bond with the risen Lord. The reading tells us how the Lord pruned the former Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, a fanatic who had persecuted the Church, to produce a fruit-bearing branch called Paul, the zealous Apostle to the Gentiles, entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Even Paul's forced return to Tarsus for a brief period is an example of God's pruning of the vine to bring forth a greater harvest, namely, the mission to the Gentiles.

In today's second reading, John, in his first letter to the Church, explains that only if we remain united to Christ by putting our Faith in him and drawing our spiritual strength from him, will we be able to obey God's commandments, especially the commandment of love.

In the Gospel, taken from the Last Supper discourse, Jesus uses his favorite image of the vine and branches to help his disciples understand the closeness of their relationship with him and the necessity of their maintaining it. They are not simply rabbi and disciples. Their lives are mutually dependent - as close as a vine and its branches. In fact, in using this image, Jesus is explaining to them and to us what our relationship with him should be like.

Life messages: 1) We need pruning in our Christian life. Cutting out of our lives everything that is contrary to the spirit of Jesus and renewing our commitment to Christian ideals in our lives every day is the first type of self-imposed pruning expected of us. A second means of pruning is to practice self-control over our evil inclinations, sinful addictions and aberrations. Cordial mingling with people of different cultures, races, religions and orientations in our neighborhood and society enables us to prune away our selfish and prejudicial tendencies as we treat others in the society with Christian charity and openness. Jesus prunes, purifies and strengthens us by allowing us to face pain and suffering, contradictions and difficulties with the courage of our Christian convictions.

2) We need to abide in Christ and let Christ abide in us: The four Gospels teach us how to become true disciples of Jesus and how to abide in him as branches abide in the main trunk of the vine, drawing their life from it. Personal and liturgical prayers, frequenting of the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation, daily and meditative reading of the Bible and selfless, loving acts of kindness, mercy and forgiveness enable us to abide in Jesus, the true vine, as fruit-bearing branches.

EASTER V (May 3): ACTS 9: 26-31; 1JOHN 3:18-24; JN 15: 1-8



Anecdotes: #1:

Hampton Court vine:

Donald Grey Barnhouse tells about a grapevine in Hampton Court near London that is about 1,000 years old. See more at: <http://www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace/stories/palacehighlights/TheGreatVine#sthash.Vfmdv4c1.dpuf>. It has but one root which is at least two feet thick. Some of the branches are 200 feet long. Because of skillful cutting and pruning, the vine produces several tons of grapes each year. Even though some of the smaller branches are 200 feet from the main stem, they bear much fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them (*Sermons Illustrated*). If we, the branches, are not bearing much fruit, it may be that we are not feeding as we ought upon the life-giving flow from the vine. The great truth that Jesus is trying to tell us is that if we want life in all its fullness, then we must be connected to the "true vine," the very source of life. "Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus said. We draw our life from him.



2: "**Jesus nut**" The "Jesus nut," also called the "Jesus pin," is the nut that holds the main rotor to the mast of some helicopters, such as the UH-1 Iroquois helicopter. The long and strong metallic fans of the helicopter are fitted to the main rotor of the mast. The "Jesus nut" is a slang term first coined by American soldiers in Vietnam; the technical term is MRRN or *main rotor retaining nut*. The origin of the term comes from the idea that, if the "Jesus nut" were to fail in flight, the helicopter would detach from the rotors and the only thing left for the crew to do would be to pray to Jesus before the helicopter crashed. Today's Gospel explains why Jesus must be the pivotal point in our lives, through the little parable of the vine and the branches.

3: Stay connected to Christ the servant: Some years ago, Mother Teresa was asked by a reporter one day, "What is your biggest problem?" Without a moment of hesitation, Mother Teresa answered with one word: "Professionalism." She said: "Here are these servants of Jesus who care for the poorest of the poor. I have one who just went off and came back with her medical degree. Others have come back with registered nurse degrees. Another

with a master's in social work... and when they came back with their degrees... their first question always is, 'Where is my office?' Then she said, 'But you know what I do? I send them over to the House of the Dying where they simply hold the hands of dying people for six months and after that, they're ready to be servants again.'" [Victor D. Pentz, "Take This Job and Love It" *Protestant Hour Sermon*, (3/14/2005), p.3.] This was the greatness of Mother Teresa... her unflinching commitment to stay connected to Christ's Servant Mentality.

Introduction: Today's Scripture selections emphasize the need for Christians to abide in Christ as a condition for producing fruits of kindness, mercy, charity and holiness. The first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, testifies to the abundance of spiritual fruits yielded by the apostles because of their close bond with the risen Lord. The reading tells us how the Lord pruned the former Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, the fanatic who had persecuted the Church, to produce a fruit-bearing branch called Paul, the zealous Apostle to the Gentiles, entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Even Paul's forced return to Tarsus for a brief period is an example of God's pruning of the vine to bring forth a greater harvest, namely, the mission to the Gentiles. In today's second reading, John, in his first letter to the Church, explains that only if we remain united to Christ by putting our faith in him and drawing our spiritual strength from him, will we be able to obey God's commandments, especially the commandment of love. In the Gospel, taken from the Last Supper discourse, Jesus uses his favorite image of the vine and branches to help his disciples understand the closeness of their relationship with him and the necessity of their maintaining it. They are not simply rabbi and disciples. Their lives are mutually dependent - as close as a vine and its branches. In fact, in using this image, Jesus is explaining to them and to us what our relationship with him should be like.

First reading, Acts 9:26-31: Today's first reading, taken from Acts, concentrates on one apostle in particular, namely Paul, who was pruned like a vine to be an apostle "by the will of God" (1 Cor 1:1). The story of Paul's conversion and call to become the Apostle to the Gentiles is narrated three times in Acts, in Chapters 9, 22 and 26. Today's reading, taken from Acts 9, describes the aftermath of his transformation from enemy of the early Christian movement to a God-chosen instrument bringing the Gospel to non-Jews. Jesus himself pruned away the former Saul, the Saul who had persecuted the Church, to make Paul, a man whose life was entirely dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. But when Paul came to Jerusalem after preaching in Damascus for "a long time," the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of him. Finally they recognized the transforming power of the Spirit of God operating in Paul and gave their full support to him. Because Paul had become a vigorous witness for Christ, the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews), tried to kill him. When Paul's life was threatened, the other apostles helped him to leave Jerusalem and return to

Tarsus. But even this setback in Paul's missionary work turned out to be just one more example of God's pruning of Paul - the vine-branch - to bring forth a greater harvest: the mission to the Gentiles.

Second Reading, 1 John 3:18-24: *The New American Bible* states that some members of John's early Christian community were advocating false doctrines, by refusing to accept the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus, by disregarding the commandment of love of neighbor, by refusing to accept Faith in Christ as the source of sanctification and by denying the redemptive value of Jesus' death. Hence, John says in the opening sentence in today's reading, *"Little children, let us love in deed and in truth and not merely talk about it."* John is criticizing pious Christians who are comfortable with their petty hatreds and uncaring indifference, as though such attitudes were acceptable behavior for those saved by Christ. The next sentence, *"His commandment is this: We are to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and are to love one another as He commanded us,"* summarizes best the essence of Christianity and disapproves extreme ideological positions like those threatening the Church today, namely, (1) *dogmatic conservatism*, which makes creedal orthodoxy the only criterion, (2) *fideism* in which all that matters is "accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior," and (3) *liberalism*, which reduces Christianity to living peacefully with others. The concluding advice, *"keep (God's) commandments,"* invites us to a transformed life, flowing from a mutual, intimate relationship between God and each of us individual believers -- our union in His love. It follows that we must love each other with the same selfless, sacrificial, forgiving love with which Jesus Christ loved us; indeed, that is His command to us. John also teaches us that personal assurance of salvation doesn't depend on intense religious experience (being "born again"), or dramatic charismatic expressions among believers (like speaking in tongues, healing, or handling poisonous snakes). Rather, we are saved because we are members of Christ - of His Church, the community gifted with God's "Spirit," in which the Spirit's presence is corroborated by the members' genuine, loving concern for each other.

Exegesis: The context: Today's Gospel text is part of Jesus' farewell discourse during his Last Supper with his disciples, as found in John 13-17. Jesus explains to his apostles how they and their disciples can carry on when he is no longer bodily or physically present. Jesus assures them, using the parable of the vine and branches, that the life-giving Spirit Whom Jesus will send them, will be present and active within and among his disciples and their successors.

Israel as God's vine and vineyard: There are numerous Old Testament passages which refer to Israel as a vine: Ps 80:8-16, Is 5:1-7, Jer 2:21, Ez 15:1-8, 17:5-10, 19:10-14, and Hos 10:1. *"The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel,"* sings the prophet Isaiah in his song of the Vineyard (Is 5:1-7). *"Yet I planted you a choice*

vine" is God's message to Israel through Jeremiah (Jer 2:21). "*Israel is a luxuriant vine,*" says Hosea (Hos 10:1). The vine is part and parcel of Jewish imagery and the very symbol of Israel, serving as an emblem on the coins of the Maccabees. One of the glories of the Temple was the great golden vine upon the front of the Holy Place. But the symbol of the vine is never used in the Old Testament apart from the idea of degeneration and infidelity deserving of Yahweh's severe punishment. That is why Ezekiel says that it should be burned in the fire (Ez 15).

Jesus claims that he is the true vine: Since Israel has become a degenerate vine producing wild and bitter grapes, Jesus makes the unique claim that he is the true and ideal vine and his disciples are the living and fruit-producing branches. He clarifies his statement, explaining that his Heavenly Father is the Vine-grower (v. 1), he (Christ) is the vine (v. 5), his disciples are branches (v. 5) and those who do not abide in him are useless branches, suitable only to be cut away and thrown into the fire (v. 6). Jesus is the true vine, because the old vine, the original chosen people, was succeeded by the new vine, the Church, whose head is Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:9). To be fruitful, one must be joined to the new, true vine, Christ. It is living the life of Christ, the life of grace, which gives the believer the nourishment which enables him or her to yield the fruits of eternal life. This image of the vine also helps us to understand the unity of the Church. St. Paul explains that we are Christ's mystical body in which all the members are intimately united with the head and united to one another (1 Cor 12:12-26; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4: 15-16).

Pruning an essential part of growing fruit-producing branches: In the vineyards in Palestine, pruning was done in late fall or early winter because pruning in spring or summer caused excessive bleeding that weakened the vine. Dead branches were cut away to save the vine. Other branches were pruned so that they would bear more grapes than leaves in the next growing season. John describes God as the Vine-grower who has planted a vine, Jesus. The Father removes every branch that bears no fruit and prunes the other branches so they may bear more fruit. Jesus tells his apostles that they have already been pruned by the words he has spoken to them. He refers to the announcement that he will soon be leaving them by his death on the cross. The apostles will not feel the full impact of this "pruning" until Jesus is actually taken away from them in death. Eventually, they will be pruned of all attachment to the things of this world so that they may be ready to attach themselves to the things of Heaven. It is a sorry sight to see that some of us just come to Church Sunday after Sunday in search of spiritual "*handouts*" or just to "*fulfill our Sunday obligation,*" but give little or nothing back to the community. They are like fruitless, leafy branches draining life from the trunk without giving anything in return.

Abiding in Jesus as condition for fertility: Even a well-pruned branch cannot bear grapes unless it abides in the vine, drawing water and minerals from the main trunk and transporting food prepared in the leaves to the main trunk and to the roots. Jesus reminds us that we can not bear fruit either, unless we abide in him just as he abides in us. Jesus says, *"I am the vine, you are the branches."* What Jesus means is that by abiding in him we will bear much fruit, and that apart from him we can do nothing. Abiding in Christ means that God has to be inside us and we have to be inside God. We abide in Christ by drawing near to God and by experiencing His being near to us, or by living every moment as he has commanded us to do, with the radiant presence of Christ all around us. This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is maintained by the spiritual helps common to all the faithful, chiefly by active participation in the Liturgy. Those of us who do not abide in Jesus will wither and be thrown away, just as withered branches are thrown into the fire to be burned. Fruit-bearing in Christian life is not just of our own making. It is the sign that Christ is working in us and through us.

Life messages: 1) We need pruning in our Christian life. Cutting out of our lives everything that is contrary to the spirit of Jesus and renewing our commitment to Christian ideals in our lives every day is the first type of self-imposed pruning expected of us. A second means of pruning is practicing self-control over our evil inclinations, sinful addictions and aberrations. Cordial mingling with people of different cultures, races, religions and orientations in our neighborhood and society enables us to prune away our selfish and prejudicial tendencies and to treat others in our society with Christian charity and openness. Jesus prunes, purifies and strengthens us by allowing us to face pain and suffering, contradictions and difficulties with courage of our Christian convictions.

2) Let us abide in Christ and let Christ abide in us: The four Gospels teach us how to become true disciples of Jesus and how to abide in him as braches abide in the main trunk of the vine and draw their life from the vine. Personal and liturgical prayers, frequenting of the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation, daily and meditative reading of the Bible and selfless, loving acts of kindness and mercy and forgiveness enable us to abide in Jesus, the true vine, as fruit-bearing branches.

JOKE OF THE WEEK (Sorry! No joke on the vine and the branches. Let the people laugh at pastor's expense)

1: The Usher: An elderly woman walked into the local country church. The friendly usher greeted her at the door and helped her up the flight of steps. "Where would you like to sit?" he asked politely. "The front row please," she

answered. "You really don't want to do that," the usher said. "The pastor is really boring." "Do you happen to know who I am? I'm the pastor's mother," she declared indignantly. "Do you know who I am?" the usher asked. "No," she said. "Good," he answered.



18 Additional anecdotes: 1) **No water:** In the late 1980s, a fire destroyed a building on the lower East side of Manhattan. An alarm was sounded and the trucks and personnel arrived in plenty of time to fight the fire. The exit doors worked properly. The steps were clear. The people got out of the building quickly and in order. However, the fire burned out of control and the building had to be demolished. When the firemen arrived, the hoses on the wall were installed properly. There were hoses hundreds of feet in length--clearly sufficient to put the fire out. It was discovered too late, however, that the city water line had never been connected to this part of the system. It was a deadly oversight. To live a human life disconnected from the living God is tragic as well. Jesus did more than come to live among us. He is the life giving vine and we are the braches.

2) **The vineyard and the gardener:** In *First Things First*, Roger Merrill relates the story of a busy man who decided to landscape his grounds. He contacted a talented woman with a doctorate in horticulture and experience in landscaping and expressed his desire to hire her to set a garden. But he emphasized to her the need to create a maintenance-free garden with automatic sprinklers and other labor-saving devices because he was too busy to spend much time on upkeep. But she said, "There's one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there's no gardener, there's no garden!" In today's Gospel Jesus asserts that he is the vine, we are the branches and his Heavenly Father is the gardener.

3) **Gerald Coffee, a retired navy captain,** was a prisoner of war for seven years. His home was a cell that allowed him to take only three steps in any direction. Still, during these years of unbelievable hardship he was able to pray, "God, help me use this time to get better." He took a dismal situation and used it for a time of mental, emotional and spiritual growth. In spite of being able to communicate with his fellow POWs only by tapping on the cell walls, he along with other prisoners managed to learn French. He learned to recite Kipling and Shakespeare. Most amazing of all, Coffee and his fellow prisoners were able to keep their sense of humor. Often he composed poems to keep himself amused. One that he particularly liked went, "Little weevil in my bread, I think I've just bit off your head." Today Captain Coffee addresses major corporations on the subject of keeping your faith (and sense of humor) during difficult times. He shares his harrowing experience in order to inspire others. [Allen Klein, *The Healing Power of Humor* (Los Angeles, California: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1989).] Gerald Coffee's captors could not know he had connections in high places. Gerald Coffee is connected to the vine which is Christ. And that is the difference in life. Christ is the vine. We draw our life from him. He is the vine. We are the branches. It is He who links us to one another. We not only have connections in high places. We also have connections in low places and places in between. We are connected to one another as branches linked to the vine of Christ.

4) ***Shadow of the Hawk*:** There is a scene in the movie *Shadow of the Hawk* where a young couple is climbing a mountain with the help of their Indian guide in a desperate attempt to flee from evil people. At one point the young woman slumps to the ground and says, "I can't take another step." The young man lifts her to her feet and says, "But darling, we must go on. We have no other choice!" She shakes her head and says, "I can't go on! I can't go on!" Then the Indian guide advises the young man, "Hold her close to your heart. Let your strength and your courage flow out of your body into hers. "The young man does this and in a few minutes the woman smiles and says, "Now I can go on! Now I can do it!" By telling us the parable of the vine and branches in today's Gospel, Jesus wants to share his Divine strength with us. The parable reminds us that united with Jesus we can do anything, but separated from him we are good for nothing.

5) **Power of a squash:** You may remember that fascinating experiment that took place at Amherst College some years ago in which a squash seed was planted in good soil. When it had produced a squash about the size of a man's head, the researchers put a band of steel about it with a harness attachment by which they sought to determine the lifting power of the squash as it tried to grow. They estimated that it might have the power of 500 pounds; which in itself would have been amazing. In a month it was pressing the 500 pounds; in two months 1,500 pounds, then it went to 2,000 and they had to strengthen the bands. It finally reached a pressure of 5,000 pounds when it broke the bands. They

opened the squash and found it full of course fibers that had grown to fight away the obstacle that was hindering its growth. Roots extended out about 80,000 feet in all directions, as the squash was reaching out for help to strengthen the fiber. [Eric Butterworth, *Unity of all Life* (New York: Harper & Row).] I would hate to think that you and I have less determination than a squash. We have been given minds and bodies and dreams that we might struggle against life and produce fruit worthy of branches connected to the living vine of Jesus.

6) **"Presbyterian, but disconnected."** Some years ago in the city of Belfast in Northern Ireland, the members of one of the large Presbyterian churches decided to undertake a religious census among some 2000 homes in their district. When the results were in, the pastor of the church found himself seated at his desk, confronted with a huge heap of reports, and he began to note the visitors' findings and especially any comments made by the visitors at the bottom of the page. One remark that occurred again and again was, "Used to be a Presbyterian; now belong nowhere." Or, "The children go to Sunday School, but the parents aren't interested." And then his eyes fell on one unusual comment at the foot of one of the pages which startled him. It read simply, "Presbyterian, but disconnected." "Disconnected." That's a fascinating word. It sounds as though somebody had pulled the plug on the poor chap. Or perhaps he had pulled the plug on himself, thereby committing spiritual suicide. No longer was he connected up with the church in which he was raised, or any other church, for that matter. This is sad because God created us to be connected up with one another. God intended for us to be in communion with God and with one another. The New Testament knows of no such thing as solitary Christianity. To be a Christian at all is to be in relationship with other Christians. Anyone and everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ automatically belongs to anyone and everyone else who belongs to Jesus Christ. *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."* (John 15:5)

7) **Affirm and cultivate awareness of the indwelling Christ.** There is an old story about Albert Einstein. He was going around the country from university to university on the lecture circuit, giving lectures on his theory of relativity. He traveled by chauffeur-driven limousine. One day, after they had been on the road for awhile, Einstein's chauffeur said to him, "Dr. Einstein, I've heard you deliver that lecture on relativity so many times, I'll bet I could deliver it myself." "Very well," the good doctor responded. "I'll give you that opportunity tonight. The people at the university where I am to lecture have never seen me. Before we get there, I'll put on your cap and uniform and you will introduce me as your chauffeur and yourself as me. Then you can give the lecture." For awhile that evening, everything went according to plan. The chauffeur delivered the lecture flawlessly. But as the lecture concluded, a professor in the audience rose and

asked a complex question involving mathematical equations and formulas. The quick-thinking chauffeur replied, "Sir, the solution to that problem is so simple I'm really surprised you've asked me to give it to you. Indeed, to prove to you just how simple it is, I'm going to ask my chauffeur to step forward and answer your question." What I'm asking you to consider is not about anything as complex as the theory of relativity. It is about our close relationship with Christ the vine, deriving the sap of spiritual life from him, as braches do from the main stem of the vine.

8) **Fish on the beach sand:** "Take a fish and place him on a beach. Watch his gills gasp and scales dry. Is he happy? No! How do you make him happy? Do you cover him with a mountain of cash? Do you get him a beach chair and sunglasses? Do you bring him a *Playfish* magazine and a martini? Do you wardrobe him in double-breasted fins and people-skinned shoes? Of course not! So, how do you make him happy? You put him back in his element. That's what you do. You put him back in the water. He will never be happy on the beach because he was not made for the beach. Indeed so, and the same is true for you and me. We will never be happy living apart from the One who made us and saved us. Just like a fish was made to live in water... we were made to live in close fellowship with our Lord... and nothing can take the place of that." (Max Lucado in his book, *When God Whispers Your Name*).

9) **Stay connected to Christ the vine with servant mentality:** In his book, *Living on Tiptoe*, Cecil Myers reminds us of a time when a group of educators in our country wanted to honor Albert Schweitzer... and they brought him to America. The University of Chicago planned to give him an honorary degree. When Albert Schweitzer's train arrived, the university leaders ran to greet him warmly and they told him of their joy in having him here in America. But then as they turned to leave the train station, suddenly Albert Schweitzer was gone. He just disappeared, vanished, slipped away. They looked everywhere for him. Finally, they found him. He was carrying a suitcase for an elderly woman. He saw that she was having trouble and rushed over to help her. You see, it was so much a part of his life to be a servant for others that it was as natural as breathing for him (when he got off the train), to begin immediately to look for somebody to help. That was his approach to life... and he had learned that from the Bible... he had learned that in Church... he had learned that from Jesus. Albert Schweitzer loved to help other people because he was strongly connected to Christ and His servant mentality. The university officials said later that when they saw Dr. Schweitzer helping that woman with her suitcase... they were wishing like everything that they could find somebody they could help... somebody whose

10) **The novel: *Brazil*:** John Updike once more revealed his remarkably brilliant powers of description in the novel *Brazil*. Updike shares his uncanny ability to

portray the setting and landscape that surround his characters in order to highlight their nature and their roles. However, Updike's greatest gift is the manner in which he is able to crawl inside the characters to reveal their restless and frantic struggles to discover themselves. The principal characters in *Brazil* are Tristao and Isabel. Their love for each other survives a tormented parade of trials forced on them by family, nature, society, and the economy. Yet, the end for them is as tragic as for Tristan and Isolde, whose names and whose roles are so similar. Purposely, the reader is left to wonder a great deal about the significance of such relationships and, above all, about the meaning of such lives. Today, the Holy Gospel suggests to us that life lived apart from our Lord Jesus Christ is meaningless and without purpose. Jesus himself talks about the need to be attached to him. We can readily appreciate the importance of relationship in a day when human relations are extremely difficult. What Jesus suggests, however, is that all human relations are dependent upon him.

11) John Kennedy and Martin Luther King: In his book, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*, Gary Wills contrasts the contributions of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., through their conception of power. The Camelot that JFK created at the White House vanished. On the other hand, King, the pacifist who believed in non-violence and achievements through suffering and patience, made lasting impressions on our society. In like manner, the contrast in styles and understanding of power in ordinary people makes for differences in their lives. People who in their quiet ways draw life from the One who is the Vine discover that they not only live in him by love and grace, and he in them, but also they are able to live in one another through love and grace.

12) "Mom, you'll never have to take in washing again." : Marian Anderson, perhaps the greatest soprano who ever lived, had a wonderful relationship with her mother. It was said of Mrs. Anderson's life: her music could bring one to tears; her life could bring one to his/her knees. She was once being interviewed and she was asked the most wonderful moment in her most impressive career. She could have mentioned that time when the great Arturo Toscanini told her that hers was the greatest voice of the century. She could have mentioned that time when she sang before the Roosevelts and the King and Queen of England. She could have said that it was winning a coveted award for the person who had done the most for her hometown of Philadelphia. There was also the time when she sang before a crowd of 75,000 on Easter Sunday beneath the Lincoln statue. Which of these high moments would she chose? None of them. "My greatest moment," she said, "is when I went home to my mother and said: 'Mom, you'll never have to take in washing again.'" If this relationship can exist between a mother and a daughter, then how much more can our relationship with Jesus Christ be? "I am the true vine," he said. "As the Father has loved me, so I love

you." And what happens, when we abide in him and he abides in us? Our joy will be made full.

13) He was buying a get-well card for the bus driver. She had been brutally murdered on a neighborhood bus. A young, teenaged girl. Cut down in the prime of life by a man suddenly gone berserk. The bus driver, struggling with her assailant, was himself injured. The morning after the tragedy, I was in a drugstore when this young lady's father entered. I did not know him, but was told by the druggist, "That's the girl's father." I immediately assumed he was in the store having a prescription filled for a sedative of some sort. I could well imagine the effects of this sudden and shocking tragedy on the family. The next day I found out how wrong had been my assumption. Do you know what that father was doing in the drugstore the morning after his daughter's tragic death? He was buying a get-well card for the bus driver. Such concern is not born in the orchard of a life barren of fruit. The father's action was most Christ-like. Even in personal sorrow, he was concerned for the well-being of another. Where does such gallantry of soul come from? It comes when one looks into the heart of God through a living relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel, Our Lord, using vivid symbolism, spells out clearly his relationship to us, and our relationship to him. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing."

14) "Lady Diana came to the church as a commoner; she departed as royalty." Back in 1981, the attention of the world was focused on the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. The reporter of a newspaper was describing the arrival of the entourage to the Cathedral where the wedding was to take place. He described how all the royal family were carried in special royal coaches to the Cathedral while Lady Diana arrived in the coach of a commoner. Then there was this rather telling sentence in the newspaper account. "Lady Diana came to the church as a commoner; she departed as royalty." This is a vivid description of what grace is all about. We come as sinners, but grace turns us into heirs and joint heirs with Christ of all that God wants to give us. It also is a vivid description of the possibility that comes to each one of us – the possibility of a deeper walk with Christ. Jesus said to his disciples, "*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.*" Ponder that awesome truth. We have not chosen God; God has chosen us. In His extravagant grace, He has given us His love, and confronted us with His call. We arrive in his presence as commoners; we leave as royalty.

15) Story of a branch separated from the vine in the film *La Dolce Vita*: The film follows the exploits of a young scandal-sheet writer named Marcello as he flits from mistress to mistress and from orgy to orgy. Marcello embodies the loneliness, emptiness and boredom of the jet-set crowd with whom he keeps

company. Their decay is symbolized in the last scene in which Marcello and his friends find on a beach a strange fish rotting in the sun. Across the inlet, an innocent girl calls to Marcello. Although she reminds him of the good and simple life he once enjoyed and could recover, he cannot find the courage to react to her invitation. *La Dolce Vita* illustrates what our Lord meant when he said in today's gospel: "*A man who does not live in me is like a withered branch, picked up to be thrown in the fire and burnt.*" When Marcello was growing up with his family in a small town he led a simple but happy life. But now that he had forsaken their religion and lifestyle for the decadence of the big cities, he found himself not only unhappy, but also dying intellectually, morally and spiritually. Indeed, Fellini's image of the rotting fish and Christ's metaphor of the withered branch are strong symbols of what happens to us when we separate ourselves from our Lord, his Church and our family [Albert Cylwicki in *His Word Resounds*].

16) **One-hundred percent American?** Today's Gospel speaks of our radical dependence on God for everything. To be fruitful, the branch has to be cut and pruned, but must remain always attached to the vine or else it dies. "*As a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me.*" Often we do not like to admit our dependence, but the fact remains that we are constantly dependent on others for our daily existence. "The average person might awaken in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East, to a clock, a medieval European invention. He slips into soft moccasins invented by American Indians. He showers with soap invented by the ancient Gauls, and dries himself with a Turkish towel. Returning to the bedroom he dons garments derived from the clothing of nomads of the Asiatic steppes and in ancient Egypt. At his breakfast table, he has pottery invented in China, his knife is made of an alloy first produced in southern India; his fork is a medieval Italian invention, his spoon a derivative of a Roman original. His food originated in discoveries from all over the world. He reads the news of the day imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites, by a process invented in Germany upon a material invented in China. Sometime during the day he may thank a Hebrew God in an Indo-European language that he is one-hundred per cent American." - (Harold Buetow).

17) **We are the terminals:** A poor German schoolmaster, who lived in a humble house in a small village, carved over his doorway this proud inscription: "Dante, Moliere, and Goethe live here!" That schoolmaster had learned that the secret of a rich life lies in one's spiritual companionship. Jesus wants his followers to be united with him as the branches are related to their and to enjoy continually his spiritual company. "I am the vine, you are the branches", he says. In so far as we abide in him and he in us, we will bear much fruit, because he is the source of life and in so far as we do not, we will be absolutely ineffective, because without him we can do nothing. If a

schoolmaster can say that Dante and Moliere and Goethe live with him, why can't Christians say that Christ lives in us and we in Christ? Probably, most of us have at one time or other walked into a bank or an airline office to be told by the staff: "Sorry you will have to wait; the computer system is down." We can see that the computer terminals are there, some switched on. The screens are lit up; they may even perform some limited functions. However, we know they are quite helpless, because they are not connected to the 'mainframe'. Like the computer terminals, we have to be plugged into Jesus, the mainframe, if we want to be of any use. [Mark Link in *Sunday Homilies*; quoted by Fr. Botelho.]

18) United with God we stand: J.C. Penny Stores is the largest chain of dry goods stores in the world. There are more than sixteen hundred of them in every state of the United States. Mr. J.C. Penny, the owner of these stores had a very serious mid-life crisis. He was beset with fatal worries. He was so harassed with worries that he couldn't sleep, and he developed an extremely painful ailment called the shingles – a red rash and skin eruptions. His doctor put him to bed and warned him that he was a very sick man. A rigid treatment was prescribed. But nothing helped. He grew weaker day by day. He was physically and nervously broken, filled with despair. One night the doctor gave him a sedative, but its effects wore off soon, and he awoke with an overwhelming sense of his death. Getting out of his bed, he began to write farewell letters to his wife and to his son saying that he did not expect to see the dawn. When he awoke the next morning, he was surprised to find himself alive. Going downstairs, he heard singing in a little chapel where devotional exercises were held each morning. He heard them singing the beautiful hymn: *God Will Take Care of You*. He went to the chapel and listened with a weary heart to the singing, the reading of the Scripture lesson and prayer. Suddenly, something happened which were beyond any explanation. He called it a miracle. In his own words, he said, "I felt as if I was instantly lifted out of the darkness of a dungeon into warm, brilliant sunlight. I felt as if I was transported from hell to paradise. I felt the power of God as I had never felt before. I realized then that I alone was responsible for all my troubles. I knew that God with His love was there to help me. From that day to this, my life has been free from worry. I am seventy-one years old, and the most dramatic and glorious twenty minutes of my life were those I spent in that chapel that morning: *God will take care of you.*" [John Rose in *John's Sunday Homilies*; quoted by Fr. Botelho.]