Homily, 29 April 2018
Fifth Sunday of Easter

---

*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.*

---

After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared many times to his disciples. On several of these occasions we are told, to use the words from Luke, that *"he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."*

When you read the Gospels, you may notice that in the footnotes are a great many references to the Old Testament. Have you ever followed them up in order to understand *all that referred to him in all the scriptures?* I imagine that Jesus would encourage us to do so. But … let's just suppose that, like me, you haven't been as diligent as you ought to be.

Today's passage from the Gospel according to John begins *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower,"* and then we hear one of the most beloved of Jesus' metaphors: *"I am the vine and you are the branches."*

It's a beautiful metaphor, but why did Jesus choose it? How would the apostles have understood it? As you can imagine, it's an allusion to the Hebrew scriptures. So, let's follow-up one of those footnotes together …

---

In Psalm 80, in the second half, the metaphor of the vine is applied to Israel and we read this plea for compassion and restoration:

*You brought a vine out of Egypt; to plant it you drove out the nations. Before it you cleared the ground; it took root and spread through the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow, the cedars of God with its boughs. It stretched out its branches to the sea, to the Great River it stretched out its shoots. Then why have you broken down its walls? It is plucked by all who pass by.*
It is ravaged by the boar of the forest, devoured by the beasts of the field.
God of hosts, turn again, we implore, look down from heaven and see.
Visit this vine and protect it, the vine your right hand has planted.

"Visit this vine and protect it," that was the people's plea.
And God's response was to send his only son, so that his vineyard -- the world and all the peoples -- might be saved through him.

Jesus tells us plainly that without God the vineyard cannot survive, cannot prosper, and it's why he came to us:

My father is the vine grower, I am the true vine, and you are the branches. 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.
Remain in me, as I remain in you.

Yet so many people do not remain in him and are like fallen branches that wither and die and are good only for fuel -- to be thrown into a fire and burned.
It happens to so many people: they turn away from God and wither -- some slowly, some quickly -- and they are consumed by the world and its allurements.

But that isn't the fate God wants for us. He loves us. God permits even fallen branches to be grafted back on to the vine. It is never too late to bear good fruit, not even for those whose spirits seem withered and dead.

There are a great many stories of this sort: stories of conversion or reconversion. They are captivating stories of someone coming back to the vineyard and being grafted to the vine and bearing much fruit. Let me share just one ...

Dorothy Day was a social activist, journalist, and Catholic convert. She grew up in a home that was nominally Christian, though as a girl she was intrigued by Christianity. She read the scriptures, which provided the beginnings of her concern for the poor and the marginalized.

Born in Brooklyn in 1897, she lived through World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War.

As a young woman in the 1920s she lived a dissolute and wasted life – full of sensation and sensuality, as she described it. In those years, she expressed her
social activism through the secular movements of the time: socialism, communism, anarchism. "The world was in terrible shape," she wrote, "and I'm glad we stood up and said what we believed; but a lot of the time we'd say these beautiful things about justice and fairness and equality, but we weren't so nice to each other."

"We have all known the long loneliness," she wrote later, "and we have learned that the only solution is love -- and that love comes with community."

Those secular movements worked for justice, but they were often angry and resentful in tone. Dorothy saw them in contrast to the loving concern for the poor and the downtrodden expressed in the scriptures, especially in the Gospels. It was this insight that played a significant part in her conversion.

She loved the social teachings of the Church. "I felt that the Church was the Church of the poor," she said, "but at the same time," she continued, "I felt it did not set its face against a social order which made so much charity necessary."

This disparity between what the many in the Church said and did, made her resentful rather than proud of many Catholic institutions. Yet she did not turn away from the Church. She was a branch that had been grafted onto the vine and she wasn't about to cut herself off and wither.

She would bear fruit by living out, with others, the social teachings of the Church and the demands of the Gospel. And so, she became a Catholic social activist: one who went to daily mass, prayed the liturgy of the hours, read scripture, was strengthened by the sacraments, and personally performed the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

With a fellow Catholic activist, Peter Maurin, she founded the Catholic Worker Movement, established over a hundred Catholic Worker communities, and published the Catholic Worker newspaper.

Through her writings, her personal example, and her great trust in the providence of God, she earned the esteem and admiration of many people in both the secular world and the Church, including many bishops and popes.

Jesus said "Remain in me, as I remain in you." St. John the Apostle reminds that the way we remain in Jesus is to keep his commandments. That's just what Dorothy Day did: she loved God and her neighbor. She remained on the vine and bore the best of fruit. Let's do the same.