

## ST THOMAS AQUINAS ON JOHN 15:1-8 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Year B)

In this talk our Lord especially wants to comfort his disciples about two things: one was near, in the present, and this was his passion; the other was what they feared in the future, and this was the troubles which would come upon them. He had said to them about these two things: **Let not your hearts be troubled**, referring to the first, and neither let them be afraid (14:27), referring to the second.

So now, after comforting them over his leaving (14:1), he strengthens them for the troubles which will come upon them. First, he presents a certain picture; secondly, he moves from this to his intention (15:3). The picture he presents is of a vine and a vinedresser. First, he mentions the vine; secondly, the vinedresser; and thirdly, he approves of the vinedresser's concern for the branches of the vine.

He himself is the vine. So he says, making a comparison, **I am the vine**; for just like a vine, although it seems to be of small account, nevertheless surpasses all trees in the sweetness of its fruit, so Christ, although he seemed to be despised by the world because he was poor, and seemed of small account and was publicly disgraced, nevertheless produced the sweetest fruit: "His fruit was sweet to my taste" (Song 2:3). And so Christ is a vine producing a wine which interiorly intoxicates us: a wine of sorrow for sin: "You have given us to drink the wine of sorrow" [Ps 60:3]; and a wine which strengthens us, that is, which restores us: "My blood is drink indeed" (6:55). In the same way he compared himself, above, to wheat, for his flesh is truly food.

This is the vine mentioned in Genesis (40:9-10): "There was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches," that is Christ, in whom there are three substances: his body, soul and divinity. This is also the vine about which Jacob says: "My son, tie your she-ass," that is, the Church, "to the vine" [Gen 49:11].

1980 This vine is true. Sometimes what is true is distinguished from its likeness, as a man is distinguished from his picture. And sometimes what is true is distinguished from what is deformed or spoiled, as true wine is distinguished from vinegar, which is spoiled wine. When Christ says here, **I am the true vine**, he is using true in the second sense to distinguish himself from the deformed or spoiled vine, which is the Jewish people. We read about them: "How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine" (Jer 2:21). This was because this vine brought forth wild grapes instead of grapes: "When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" (Is 5:4).

There are two natures in Christ, the divine and the human. Because of his human nature he is like us and is less than the Father. Because of his divine nature he is like God and above us. Thus he is the true vine insofar as he is the head of the

Church, the man Christ Jesus. He implies this when he mentions the vinedresser, who is the Father. He says, **and my Father is the vinedresser**. If Christ is the vine because of his divine nature, the Father would also be the vine like the Son. But because Christ is the vine by reason of his human nature, the Father is related to him as vinedresser to vine. Indeed, even Christ himself, as God, is a vinedresser.

[The vinedresser cultivates the vine.] Now to cultivate something is to devote one's interest to it. And we can cultivate something in two ways: either to make what is cultivated better, as we cultivate a field or something of that sort, or to make ourselves better by the cultivating, and in this way we cultivate wisdom. God cultivates us to make us better by his work, since he roots out the evil seeds in our hearts. As Augustine says, he opens our hearts with the plough of his words, plants the seeds of the commandments, and harvests the fruit of devotion.

But we cultivate God, not by ploughing but by adoring, in order that we may be made better by him: "If any one is a worshiper," that is, a cultivator, "of God and does his will, God listens to him" (9:31). And so the Father is the vinedresser of this vine for the good of others. For he plants: "I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed" (Jer 2:21), and makes it grow: I planted, Apollos can make one grow from within and produce fruit, no matter how much others cooperate on the exterior. And God guards and preserves, for we read that he built a watchtower in the vineyard, and put a hedge around it (Mt 21:33; Is 5:2).

The vinedresser is concerned about two things: the vine and its branches. Now the vine considered here was perfect, and did not need care by the vinedresser. And so the entire care of the vinedresser will be directed to the branches. He says, **every branch of mine** and so forth. The branches of a vine, however, have the nature of the vine; and so those united to Christ are branches of this vine: "The vine brought forth branches" [Ez 17:6]. He mentions two things about the branches: first, the attitude of the vinedresser to the bad branches; his interest in the good branches.

The vinedresser's interest in the bad branches is to cut them off the vine. Thus he says, **every branch**, that is, every believer, **of mine that bears no fruit**, that is, bears no fruit on the vine, which is me, without whom nothing can bear fruit, **he takes away** from the vine. It is clear from this that not only are some cut off from Christ for doing evil, but also because they neglect to do good: "We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor 6:1). Thus the Apostle said about himself: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain" (1 Cor 15:10). We read in Matthew (25:28) that the money was taken away from the servant who did not bear fruit with it, but hid it instead; and our Lord ordered the unfruitful fig tree to be cut down (Lk 13:7).

His interest in the good branches is to help them so they can bear more fruit. So he says, **and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.** Considering the literal sense, we see that a natural vine with branches that have many shoots bears less fruit, because the sap is spread out through all the shoots. Thus the vinedresser prunes away the extra shoots so that the vine can bear more fruit. It is the same with us. For if we are well-disposed and united to God, yet scatter our love over many things, our virtue becomes weak and we become less able to do good. This is why God, in order that we may bear fruit, will frequently remove such obstacles and prune us by sending troubles and temptations, which make us stronger. Accordingly, he says, he **prunes**, even though one may be clean, for in this life no one is so clean that he does not need to be cleansed more and more: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). And he does this so **that it may bear more fruit**, that is, grow in virtue, so that the more pruned or cleansed the more fruitful one is: "Let the just still be justified, and the holy still be sanctified" [Rev 22:11]; "The Gospel is bearing fruit and growing" (Col 1:6); "They go from strength to strength" (Ps 84:7).

Now he passes from this picture to his main intention. Two things were noticed in the above picture when comparing the branches to the vine: the union of the branches to the vine, and the pruning of the branches. First, he considers the union of the branches with the vine; secondly, their pruning (v 18). As to the first, he advises the disciples to cling to the vine; secondly, he gives the reason for this (v 4b); thirdly, he describes this union (v 9). He does two things concerning the first: he reminds them of a benefit already received; secondly, he tells them to abide in him (4a).

The benefit they had already received was that of being cleansed. He says, **you are already made clean.** It is like saying: I have said certain things about branches; and you are branches ready to be pruned so as to bear fruit. And you are clean by the **word which I have spoken to you.**

The word of Christ, in the first place, cleanses us from error by teaching us: "He must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine" (Tit 1:9). This is because there is no falsity in the words of God: "All my words are right" [Prv 8:8]. He says, **you are already made clean** from the errors of the Jews. Secondly, the word of Christ cleanses our hearts from earthly affections by inflaming them toward heavenly things. For the word of God by its power moves our hearts, weighed down by earthly things, and sets them on fire: "Is not my word fire?" (Jer 23:29). Thirdly when God is invoked in baptism, his word cleanses us from sin. For we are cleansed in baptism because the word cleanses with the water. As Augustine says: "Take away the word and what is the water but only water? The word accompanies the element and a sacrament is formed." Thus

it is the word which makes the water touch the body and wash the heart. The word, I say, not because it is spoken, but because it is believed. For this word of faith is so strong in the Church that it even cleanses infants, although they themselves cannot believe, when it is proclaimed from the faith of those who believe, offer, bless and touch the infants, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). Fourthly, the word of Christ cleanses by the power of faith: God "cleansed their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9).

Thus he says to them, you already instructed, moved, baptized, strengthened in faith, **are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you.** "You are clean, but not all" (13:10). Since he had said above that the work of a vinedresser was to prune, he clearly shows that he is a vinedresser when he says that his word cleanses. And indeed, Christ, as God, is a vinedresser and prunes the branches.

Here he urges them to persevere. He is saying in effect: Because you are now cleansed and have received such a great benefit, you should remain this way. He says, **Abide in me**, by charity: "He who abides in love abides in God" (1 Jn 4:16); and by means of the sacraments: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me" (6:56). He says, **Abide in me**, by receiving grace, **and I in you**, by helping you.

Next (v 4b), he gives four reasons for being united to Christ. First, it sanctifies those who are united to him; secondly, those not united are punished (v 6); thirdly, those who are united to him have their desires satisfied (v 7); fourthly, it glorifies God (v 8). In regard to the first, he shows that being united to Christ is necessary in order to bear fruit; secondly that this is efficacious (v 5).

He does two things about the first: first, he presents an illustration; and secondly shows that it is apt. As to the first he says, I say that you should abide in me so that you can bear fruit, because just **as the branch** literally, a material branch, **cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine**, from whose roots sap ascends to give life to the branches, so **neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in me.** Thus, being united to Christ is the reason why someone bears fruit. And so of those who are not united to Christ we read: "What return [fruit] did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed?" (Rom 6:21); "The company of the godless is barren" (Job 15:34).

His example is apt because **I am the vine, you are the branches.** It is like saying: The relation between you and me is like that of branches to the vine. We read of these branches: "It sent out its branches to the sea" [Ps 80:11].

Here he shows that being united to Christ is efficacious: first, he shows that it is efficacious; secondly, the reason for this efficacy (v 5b).

First he says: I say that it is not only necessary for a person to abide in me in order to bear fruit, it is also efficacious, **because he who abides in me**, by believing, obeying and persevering, **and I in him**, by giving enlightenment, help and perseverance, he it is and not another, **that bears much fruit**.

Such persons bear a threefold fruit in this life. The first is that they avoid sin. Secondly, they are eager to accomplish works of holiness: "the return you get is sanctification" (Rom 6:22). Thirdly, they are eager for the progress of others: "The earth will be filled with the fruit of your works" [Ps 104:13]. They also produce a fourth fruit, but in eternal life: "He gathers fruit for eternal life" (4:36). Eternal life is the last and perfect fruit of our labours: "The fruit of good works is glorious" [Wis 3:15].

The reason for this efficacy is because **apart from me you can do nothing**. With these words he instructs the hearts of the humble and silences the mouths of the proud, especially of the Pelagians, who say that they can do by themselves, without the help of God, the good works of the virtues and of the law. And although they were trying to maintain our free will, they really undermined it.

Look at what our Lord says here! He says that without him we cannot do anything great, nor anything small, indeed, we cannot do anything at all. This is not surprising because neither does God do anything without him: "Without him was not anything made that was made" (1:3). For our works are either from the power of nature or from divine grace. If they are from the power of nature, then, since every action of nature is from the Word of God, no nature can act to do anything without him. If our works are from the power of grace, then, since he is the author of grace - "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17) - it is obvious that no meritorious work can be done without him: "Not that we are capable of thinking anything of ourselves as originating from ourselves; our capability is from God" [2 Cor 3:5]. Therefore, if we cannot even think without it coming from God, much less can we do anything else.

Here he mentions the second reason for remaining united to Christ, which is the threat of punishment, for unless we abide in him, we will not escape punishment. He mentions five things which describe this punishment. Some of these belong to the punishment of loss, that is to say, the exclusion from glory; so he says, **he is cast forth**. Sometimes on a natural vine we see a branch which remains by some sort of an external connection without sharing any of the sap. In this way also some remain connected to Christ only by faith, yet they do not share the sap of the vine because they do not have charity. Thus, such persons will be cast out, that is, separated from fellowship with the good.

The second punishment of loss is a withering; he says, **and withers**, for if such a person once took anything at all from the root, he will lose it when deprived of its help and life. Even bad Christians seem to have some kind of a freshness, but when they are separated from the saints and from Christ their dried up condition will be apparent: "My strength is dried up like a potsherd" (Ps 22:16).

The third punishment is association with those who are evil; he says, **and he is gathered**, by the reaping angels, to be with the wicked. This is a very great punishment. For if it is a great punishment to be with the wicked for only a little while, how much greater it is to be with the most evil men and devils forever: "They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit" (Is 24:22); "Gather the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned" (Mt 13:30).

The fourth punishment is that of sense; he says, **thrown into the fire**, which is eternal: "What will be done with the wood of the vine?... Look, it is given to the fire for fuel" [Ez 15:2]. If the wood of the vine does not remain united to it, it is more worthless than other woods; but if it abides on the vine it is more beautiful than the others. Thus Augustine says: "A branch is fit for two things: either the vine or the fire. If it is not on the vine, it will be in the fire." "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire" (Mt 25:41). The fifth punishment is the unending experience of fire, he says, **and burned**, without end: "And they will go away into eternal punishment" (Mt 25:46).

Now we have the third reason for abiding in Christ: our prayers become effective. He is saying, in effect, **If you abide in me**, you will obtain this fruit, that is, **ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you**.

Note that when before he urged them to remain united to him, he mentioned two things; and he repeats them here. First, he said before, **Abide in me**, and he repeats it here by saying, **If you abide in me**. Secondly, he said before, **and I in you**, in place of which he now says, **and my words abide in you**. Because Christ is the Word of the Father, all words of wisdom are from him: "The source of wisdom is God's Word in the highest heaven" (Sir 1:5). Thus it is clear that Christ is in us when the words of his wisdom are in us: "You do not have his word abiding in you" (5:38).

Thus he says, **and my words abide in you**, in four ways: by your loving them, believing them, meditating on them and accomplishing them: "My son, be attentive to my words," by believing them; "incline your ear to my sayings," by obeying or accomplishing them; "let them not escape from your sight," because you meditate on them; but "keep them within your heart," by loving them (Prv 4:20). "Your words were found and I ate them" (Jer 15:16).

Therefore, the words of Christ are in us when we do as he commands and love what he promises. And from this it follows that they teach us what we ought to pray for: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). For this reason Christ taught us to pray with his own words (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2). And so the words of God, when believed and meditated upon, teach us to ask for the things necessary for our salvation; and these words of God when loved and accomplished help us to merit it. So he adds, **ask**, with sound judgment and perseverance, **whatever you will, and it shall be done for you**: "If you ask anything of the Father in my name he will give it to you" [16:23].

Now the fourth reason for abiding in Christ is mentioned, and it is the glory of the Father. All our works should be directed to the glory of God: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory" (Ps 115:1); "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" [1 Cor 10:31]. And so our Lord shows that we are in Christ, because this is why we bear fruit, and because we bear fruit the Father is glorified. He says, **By this my Father is glorified**, that is, it reflects glory on my Father, **that you bear much fruit**.

Here he mentions, in reverse order, three things which follow one from the other. One refers to abiding in Christ, **you become my disciples**, and this is the same as "Abide in me" (v 4). The second follows from this, **you bear much fruit**. And from this my Father is glorified. He is saying in effect: It gives glory to the Father that you bear much fruit, and you bear much fruit because you are my disciples. You do this, first of all, by living well: "That they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16); and by teaching well, which also glorifies God: "Glorify the Lord by teaching" [Is 24:15]; "Every one who calls upon my name I have created him for my praise and glory" (Is 43:7). And so the apostles are the soil which bears much fruit because they have become the disciples of Christ by abiding in him and by the fire of their charity.

For these are the signs of a disciple of Christ: first that one abides in him, is united to him: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples" (8:31). And by doing this they become fit for bearing the fruit of teaching. The second sign is charity: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35). And because of this they are able to bear the fruit of good works, because nothing has any value without charity: "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries... but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2).