

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B

There is a motif of growth in today's readings – growth of the Jesus movement at its very beginnings and personal growth to wholeness in the life of the committed Christian.

Acts 9:26-31 Just before today's passage Luke provided some details of Paul's activity following the experience he had that convinced him Jesus was Israel's Messiah. This visionary encounter with the risen Lord occurred as he was making his way to Damascus. Naturally, the Jesus people in Damascus were wary because Paul had shown himself to be an ardent persecutor of 'the people of the way' as the early Jesus followers described themselves.

Paul faced a similar reaction when he came to Jerusalem but Barnabas (Aramaic for *the son of encouragement*) took him under wing and convinced the Jerusalem community that Paul's 'conversion' was genuine. We do well to be careful with the term 'conversion' because Paul and the rest of the first Jesus people did not change religions. They were faithful Jews who were firm in the belief that following the teachings of Jesus was the authentic way to God. At this stage the term *Christian* had not been coined.

When Paul preached about Jesus in the Jerusalem synagogues of the Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists) he met with a hostile backlash to the extent that his life was in danger. He was spirited away by some of the Jesus people who took him to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast of Israel and from there Paul sailed to his home town of Tarsus, on the southern coast of present day Turkey.

The Holy Spirit was backing the early Jesus movement

Luke is presenting here a summary of the early expansion of the Jesus movement. His *Acts of the Apostles* is founded on the conviction that the Holy Spirit was backing this movement and that no earthly force would have power to stifle its progress. His account also tells us that Paul was a very effective speaker, and we know from elsewhere that Paul, with his infectious passion for Christ, had a gift for persuasion.

Psalms 21/22 This is the psalm that begins, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It starts as a lament and ends as a song of jubilation and reliance on the Divine. In fact, the whole composition, dating from around the early 500s BCE, charts a spiritual journey from near despair to a state of optimism that can be shared by all 'those who seek the Lord.'

We can all relate to the poet's passage from the dark night to the realisation that 'stuff happens' and that faith and our inbuilt capacity to weather storms can steer us through stages of tears and relief.

1 John 3:18-24 Just prior to this passage the author encouraged a form of love that goes beyond emotions to express itself in reaching out to others with respect and compassion. His down-to-earth approach acknowledges that lip-service can come easily while it is our actions that show our true colours.

Here is an early community leader emphasising the point that an authentic follower of Jesus has developed the habit of actively reaching out in love and compassion to others. This is an attitude that is fuelled by commitment to Christ and his teachings. The writer mentions 'believing in the name of Jesus Christ' as a sign of this commitment. His use of 'believe' implies more than giving mere intellectual assent to Jesus and his teachings. It refers to the kind of belief that blossoms in allegiance and faithfulness. Belief identified by action.

In ancient Hebrew the word 'name' (*shem*) generally encompassed all the qualities and achievements that defined a person. So 'name' functioned as a substitute for the whole person being spoken about. As followers of Christ we are urged to faithfully commit to the person, values, teachings and attitudes of Christ. This is how we 'remain in the light' and enjoy the divine indwelling.

John 15:1-8 In this reading we get to relish the Johannine metaphor of the vine and the branches. It is easy to read this as Jesus being the stem while we are the branches. But the analogy goes further. There is a unique unity between branches and vine and the branches only flourish when they take life from the vine.

John is referring here to the divine life that abides in the faithful Christ follower. When the branch draws life from the heart of the vine it becomes an integral part of the vine so that from the branch there emerges fruit. We are capable of bearing fruit only if we discern and absorb the life of Christ that flows from living out his values and priorities. And John identifies these as the ‘words’ of Christ. Jesus the Word of God in human form is the ultimate medium of communication telling us that intimate relationship with the Divine is our way to full growth, wholeness and consummate peace. Our connection with Christ will thrive only if we live in harmony with his ‘words’ – his teachings and example.

The analogy of the vine shows that we are all connected

Another key aspect of Jesus’ analogy of the vine is that we are all interconnected. Just as we might wither if we are not part of the life of Christ so we may also wither if we are not connected to others. In our western world where individualism is so emphasised and treasured it is noticeable that there is loneliness, despair and alienation in epidemic proportions. It was once thought that depression gave rise to loneliness but studies have shown that the reverse is the case. Loneliness and alienation are the root cause of so much depression which has ruinous effects on mind and body.

We are social beings by nature and the need for connection is in our DNA. Even living alone with a pet for interaction is healthier than isolation that is not supported by some kind of active relationship. What happens to the vine if some branches choose to shut down? It is evident that they do damage to themselves and have an adverse effect on other branches.

In Paul’s language we are living ‘in Christ’ when we are active participants in our Christian community. And, sadly, this too seems to have dropped down a peg since the COVID era. We boost the life of our community through our attitude of encouragement, and this implies showing up. When you think carefully about it, how important is ‘showing up’? It means being cheerfully present in the lives of those we live and mix with.

To show up with an uplifting attitude is surely a life-giving form of encouragement

American researcher, social worker and author, Brené Brown, wrote,

Sometimes the bravest and most important thing you can do is show up.

To show up, be seen and get stuck in with an uplifting attitude is surely a life-giving form of encouragement. It is also a recipe for success in whatever endeavour we undertake. In today’s gospel reading we can hear Jesus asking us to do better than good enough. Being an active branch of the vine is our response to being one with him. Who am I encouraging? Who is on the receiving end of my uplifting attitude? These are things that need to happen.

Don’t let yesterday take up too much of today.

Will Rogers

Words of wisdom: ‘There’s a fine line between a long, drawn-out sermon and a hostage situation.’

Laurie Woods