

# **Limbs and Leaves and Sap of the One Vine or Vineyard Reflection on the Gospel-5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Year B (John 15:1-8)**

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Life's experiences teach us that, as members of the Earth community, we cannot make it on our own. We need one another, other living beings, the sun, the soil, the water and everything else that formed from exploding stars in the distant past. The gospel reading reminds us that as baptised Christians we are not just intimately interlinked but that the source of our unity is the Risen Christ. As limbs and leaves and sap of the same vine, we simply cannot survive in isolation.

The vine image picks up one of the most potent biblical images for God's relationship to the people of Israel. It is an image of life and growth, of colour and vibrancy. It holds the promise of a life-sustaining grape harvest that is ultimately transformed into wine, the biblical symbol for joy. Our gardener God brought Israel "the vine" out of Egypt (Psalm 80:9). For the prophet Isaiah, Israel is also a vineyard planted and nurtured by God (5:1-7; 27:3). For Jeremiah, Israel is the choice vine "of fully tested stock" planted by God (2:21).

The Johannine Jesus makes the claim: "I am the true vine/vineyard" and God is the "vinegrower". Jesus wants to distance himself from the ostentatious artificial golden vine that adorned the entrance to the sanctuary. He goes further: "I am the vine/vineyard and you are the branches". The potency of this image resides in the fact that a vine without branches is inconceivable. It draws us into the mystery of the mutual interchange of life between us and the risen Christ, into the mystery of God. It also invites us to acknowledge our interconnection with the whole of the Earth community, to nurture the wonderful biodiversity of our planet, and to accept the inevitability of "pruning" if we are to "bear fruit" and "become disciples".

"Pruning" can take various forms. A chance encounter, a sudden inspiration, a word from a friend, an unexpected illness, a confronting story: any such experience can bring us to our senses and serve as a "pruning" device. The first reading for today recounts the story of Saul of Tarsus who is "pruned" quite dramatically through his encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He is transformed from persecutor to defender of Christ and Christ's followers. Saul becomes a disciple and "bears much fruit". The Greek-speaking Christian Jews are suspicious, even murderous, when he tries to preach the gospel among them. Peace ensues, however, and the movement takes hold in the regions where Jesus had first preached the gospel. It is worth reflecting on the cultural diversity that characterised earliest Christianity and the tensions that had to be resolved between different language groups or groups of different ethnic origin for the gospel to flourish and bear fruit. John's gospel is written against the backdrop of such "pruning" within the early communities. Sometimes the requisite "pruning" is hearing respectfully a point of view that differs from one's own.