

“May to our souls”!

Homily for April 29th 2018

Spring has arrived! This is the time of the year when we will get out into our yards, clean up all that has been left behind from last fall, under the cover of a long winter. Trees will be pruned, gardens prepared and we will marvel once more at the renewal ushered in by the arrival of May!

The Gospel reading for today is also a text that celebrates the promise of renewal - spiritual renewal. It is a beautiful passage in which Jesus invites us to discover more deeply that to abide in Him is a great gift allowing us to know the fruitfulness characteristic of those who open their souls so to be joined to Jesus. Repeatedly in this passage Jesus presents us with an opportunity. He wants us to discover the spiritual equivalent comparable to the organic unity that exists between a vine and its branches. Throughout this passage Jesus says “Abide in me so that I may abide in you.” Live a life that is connected to me in such a way that my words become as intrinsic to your souls as the life giving sap of the vine, so as to ensure the vitality of the branches.

So this morning as we give thanks for the renewal that the month of May brings to the earth, let us think about what it means to bear fruit and so prove to be Jesus’ disciples. But before we can think about the fruitfulness we need to begin by thinking for a minute about spiritual barrenness. At the beginning of the Gospel passage we hear Jesus say these words:

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

St John was an attentive pastor. As such he understood that spiritual barrenness is something that affects the lives of disciples at different times. So in both his Gospel and his letters he addresses this issue very directly. Listen to these words from today’s epistle:

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Notice that St John locates spiritual barrenness as a matter of the heart, an issue of the soul. He describes barrenness with these accurate words: “whenever our hearts condemn us.”

There is a moving passage in Romans 7 where Paul refers to being held captive to the condemnatory heart and describes it as a body of death. He cries out:

who will save me from this body of death?

You know what this is don’t you? It may be the experience of condemnation that stalks us as we remember the effects of childhood and adolescent trauma resulting from abuse and neglect. It may be the condemnation that we experience as we struggle with a besetting sin that so often

seems to get the better of us. It may be that restlessness that is like popcorn popping in the microwave that leaves us anxious, sleepless and perhaps doubting God's love and goodness because of the complex and unresolved issues that are part of our daily lives.

When Jesus says that the Father wants to cut off branches that are barren, this is the detritus resulting from a condemnatory heart. He does not want us to abide in a state where an attitude that is condemnatory cuts us off from grace. No says Jesus, the Father wants us to be more fruitful. What does such fruitfulness look like? St. John tells us in our Epistle reading:

21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

To invite the Father to cut off the condemnatory branches allows us to be open to the sap of grace so that we can be confident before him so as to keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

To do what pleases him has both an internal and external component – like the tree where there is all that is happening in the system of the tree that determines its health, this is the internal component. The external component is what we see, a tree that is healthy and fully alive.

The internal component of a healthy soul is intricately related to believing in Jesus. In the reading from Acts we are told St. Paul preached boldly in the name of Jesus. This reference to the name of Jesus is an expression used in the Bible to describe the character of God. He is the one in whom we have life, apart from whom Jesus says we can do nothing. As Catholic Christians we understand that to believe in the name of Jesus is to place our trust in the teaching of the Church because the Church is the body and presence of Christ in the world today. As such the Church is greater than any one of us. She is greater than our hearts and so to believe in her teaching helps us to remember that we are not alone in our faith but part of this great organism that for 2000 years has believed in the name of Jesus,

To believe in the name Jesus and to trust in his name means that we understand that his words give life to the soul and so we meditate on his teaching in our lives. We understand that his body and blood, made available to us in the Eucharist, allow us to literally take his life into ours so that we receive those nutrients our souls most need. As Pope Francis said about the Eucharist in *The Joy of the Gospel*:

The Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.

The external component - that can only find true expression when we are internally sound - is this call to love one another. Such love is expressed with the simple phrase "to will the good of the other". This is the kind of love that is truly sacrificial where we choose to be present to another, intentionally and caringly. When such love is offered as an expression of our faith in Jesus St John says:

All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

To live this life that is both internal and external will allow us to abide in Jesus and so bear much fruit – the fruit of a vital faith expressed in Christ like love.

Of this love, St Jose Maria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, wrote in his book, *The Way*,

Do everything for love. Thus there will be no little things, everything will be big. Perseverance in little things for Love is heroism. (The Way 813)

Indeed it is the little things that make up our everyday lives. Every interaction with another, every duty we carry out is a way for us to abide in Jesus and thereby grow in heroic live.

Let me quote St. Jose Maria Escriva once more:

Do everything for love. Thus there will be no little things, everything will be big. Perseverance in little things for Love is heroism. (The Way 813)

When we are able to appropriate the teaching of John as expressed in the Gospel and the Epistle then the Father will tend to our souls in such a way that a condemnatory heart will give way to a confident and bold heart of heroic love. Such a heart is, so to speak, able to sit down and rest and discover even in the midst of life's turmoil and uncertainty that peace which does indeed pass understanding. When this happens we discover a spiritual renewal that is like May to our souls.