

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year B): Why should good people suffer?**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Acts 9:26-31: the early tension caused by St Paul;**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: 1 John 3:18-24: the practical effects of our faith;**  
**Gospel: John 15:1-8: as parts of the vine, we need to be ‘pruned’.**

Here is a blunt question: if our Christian faith is correct, should the world somehow be ‘different’ for us? Can we expect God to make our lives easier than those of non-believers? In the first reading, the newly-converted St Paul - then still called by his original name Saul - was shocked by the hostility and fear he met in the early Christian community at Jerusalem. However, after years of trying to stamp Christianity out, should he have expected a better reception? Naturally, the people were wondering if this vicious leopard had really changed its spots! In our lives today, should we expect to be different from others in ordinary things – young people’s dangerous use of social media; depression & other emotional problems; long-term health issues; loss of employment; family or marital breakdown; bereavement? Unfortunately, these are part of human life, and religious faith is (sadly) no barrier against them.

Why raise the issue this weekend? In the gospel, Jesus uses the analogy of the vine to describe our relationship with him. The branches are linked physically to the vine ‘stock’ – the main tree bit, and that is how they grow and produce their grapes. In a spiritual way, we are linked with the risen Son of God – it works by our belief & prayer, and the Church’s sacraments. This, in turn, helps us to produce our ‘spiritual’ fruit – the personal peace of mind and comfort we can enjoy, plus the good things we do for God and others.

But problems still occur, and that is where Jesus’ idea of ‘pruning’ comes in: *“Every branch that does bear fruit, my Father prunes, to make it bear even more.”* Just as the vine stock has to be rigorously cut back before each year’s new growth, so we are ‘cut back’ by not getting our own way. This includes problems mentioned in the first paragraph, but also areas of our personal failure – intellectual non-success, temper, bad habits, etc. It also means botched ambition – in areas like school/college work, employment prospects, unwise relationships, failed house-moves, and so on. We must also include sudden disasters such as accidents, muggings, illness, etc. These things are evil, so we should not want to suffer them just for our spiritual ‘good’. On the other hand, they are part of humanity’s shared experience, and our faith does not magically shield us from them. To be quite honest, referring back to the first reading, I do

not know what other reaction St Paul could have expected in Jerusalem, having spent so much time persecuting the infant Christian Church.

But there is another aspect to the “vine” idea – the branches withering when they are separated from the main stem. (Obviously, when deprived of water, and food from the soil, they fade away.) In our case, this happens to faith (or our relationship with Jesus) when it is not sustained by any prayer, worship, or contact with the Church community. Bit by bit, the link weakens, and our faith dies a slow death. This is because faith is not just a matter of believing facts about God; it is also a relationship with Him, and, like any human relationship, it needs contact to survive.

In a recent discussion, the fall-off in church attendance (since the pandemic began over 4 years ago) was mentioned. The hope had been that most (if not all) would return to church as soon as it was safe. Live-streamed services and on-line material like this homily have been a great boon, allowing parishes to keep in contact and share useful information with everyone - especially those unable to go to church. Sadly, they are not the same as physically sharing the worship of church communities. In a similar way, working from home on-line gets the job done, but lacks the camaraderie and social interaction of being with others in their place of work. That is why many firms insist that their employees come in to work for a certain percentage of the time. In the religious context, some young people will have already lost all sense of parish life.

In one sense, the 2nd reading (from John’s 1<sup>st</sup> Letter) covers this problem. He writes: *“God’s commandments are these: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we love one another as he told us to.”* I suggest that both the belief & the love elements in this piece are much more easily done when we share our religious activity with other people. If our religion is only done ‘on-line’, there is a risk that it loses any sense of community, which, traditionally, helps us learn what faith is, and what love means in practice.

So, where do we go from here? All we can say is: there are problems we all share, and I hope the experience of them makes us less selfish, and more appreciative of the help others give us. As members of Christ’s Church, we know that we cannot always do our own thing; Jesus was ‘pruned’ by his sufferings on Calvary, and sometimes we have to share in that process. At least, our faith tells us that, at the first Easter, good did come out of evil, and we hope that the same will happen for us. *Fr. Jim Dunne.*

