

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2018

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It is fortuitous that this time of year, when we are busy restoring our yards from the ravages of winter, we have a Mass gospel about the vine and its branches. For a few weeks each spring many of us have a special yard-waste collection service on trash day. So we are binding up sticks and dead branches for curb-side pickup. And we are aware of the difference between the dead branches on the curb and the live ones which survived the winter and are now budding with leaves and flowers.

The Lord Jesus probably gave this allegory of the vine and its branches after the Last Supper. With His disciples He was on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane. And they had to go past the Jerusalem Temple. The disciples would have seen the great golden vine with clusters of grapes which crowned the portal of the Temple porch. The golden vine was a recognized symbol of Israel.

When the Lord Jesus declared “I am the Vine” He was saying “I am Israel.” The purpose of God entrusted to Israel (and of which the Old Testament is the historic record) was being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the true Israel, the faithful remnant. In His Own Person Jesus is the whole people of God.

The culminating inspiration of the Old Testament is found in Isaiah Chapter 53. The prophet declared the perfect response by Israel to Almighty God will be given, and the divine purpose fulfilled, *by one individual*. The whole significance of Israel would be concentrated on Him. “I am the Vine” rang in the ears of our Christian ancestors in a way which seems remote to us today. They knew it was no accident Christ came out of Egypt (Mt 2.15) in fulfillment of the Psalm 80 “Thou hast brought a *vine* out of Egypt.”

Christ is the Vine. Notice He does not say He is simply the *stem*. He is *the entire plant*. Christ includes in Himself every tiny shoot and each new graft. And that is where you and I come into the picture! There have been many explanations about our relationship to Christ and to each other. There are many explanations about the themes of free will and destiny of fate. But none of them goes to the heart of the matter in a more vivid and understandable way than in this teaching of Christ given in those few minutes on the path from the Cenacle to Gethsemane. As the Lord gives the allegory of the vine, we suddenly realize the natural laws of botany are a

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lower reflection of the supernatural bond between Christ and His Church. The Very One Who told us to “consider the lilies of the field” later gave us the allegory of the vine and branches.

You do not need me to expound to you my knowledge of botany. My qualification ended with a year and a half of college biology more than fifty years ago. But like many of you, I do a bit of work in the garden. And I observe a few things. A branch of a vine has a certain freedom of movement. It can sway in the breeze; it produces leaves, flowers, and fruit. It can grow in a certain direction. The branch also has the duty of sharing its production, called photosynthesis, with the rest of the vine. In return, the branch receives from the vine food and physical support. So we can say the branch has a certain amount of autonomy, and some obligations.

If the branch did not participate in the life of the vine it would die. And in the spring, during the time of yard-waste pick up, we see the difference. Sticks lying by the curb cannot wave in the breeze. Their ability to produce leaves and flowers and fruit is gone. Dead sticks have no freedom of expression or movement. And we can begin to understand that being true to our own destiny, being incorporated in Christ, is what makes it possible to enjoy freedom and be fruitful.

We are ever so grateful the Good Lord did not use a modern analogy! He did not say “I am the larger life system of which you are a part.” No concept is more clear and more enduring than His allegory of the vine. The Lord builds on what Our Creator gave us in the natural order, and the connection was apparent in first century Palestine, but also in the blaze of color you and I are enjoying right now in springtime Boston, in our parks and campuses and own back yards.

Those who are bound to Christ realize their lives are continuous with His. We are bound by supernatural laws of being and love. We respond by striving, with His grace, to do certain things He asks, and avoiding certain other things. We act in this way because we are aware of our connection to Him. As God gives us the light, each one of us exercises free will in a conscious response, trying to serve and support the whole Body of Christ. In this way you and I, like the branch of the vine, are part of the larger whole. Yet our relationship with Christ does not stay at

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the level of the laws of science or anything else. A soul is not a stick or a twig, whether connected or not. The gospel of Jesus Christ is much more exciting than that! The Gospel is not about biological science at all. God's Own Beloved Son has declared a soul, including yours and mine, is a precious individual in the eyes of a personal Saviour.