

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 2, 2021

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It is a happy coincidence that in Boston each year the sanitation department begins its spring yard-waste pickup at just the time we have Our Lord's instruction about the vine and the branches. All over the city you can see bags of dead twigs and tied bundles of sticks and branches at the curb on trash day. Those branches are no longer connected to the tree or bush. Lying curbside they are a visible reminder that without Jesus Christ we can do nothing.

The beautiful parable of the vine and its branches was probably spoken by Christ in the Jerusalem Temple after the Last Supper. The band of disciples was following its Master on the way to Gethsemane. On their way, these men 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.

Jesus said "I am the Vine." He was plainly declaring "I am Israel." The purposes of God had been entrusted to Israel, and the Old Covenant is the historic record of that purpose, which was now being fulfilled in Christ. He is the true Israel, the faithful remnant, the Chosen One. In His Own Person Jesus Christ *is the whole people of God*.

The culminating inspiration of the Old Testament had been declared in Isaiah Chapter 53. The perfect response by Israel to Almighty God would be given (and the divine purpose fulfilled) *by one individual*. The whole significance of Israel would be concentrated in Him. "I am the vine" was ringing in the ears of our Christian forbears in a way which seems remote to us. For them the Old Testament was the Bible. They knew it was no accident that Christ came out of Egypt (*Mt 2:15*) in fulfillment of the Psalm "Thou has brought *a vine* out of Egypt." (*Psalms 80:8*).

Jesus Christ is the Vine. Notice He does not say He is simply the *stem*. *He is the entire plant*. That means the Lord includes in Himself every tiny shoot and each new graft. Which is where you and I come into the picture! There have been many explanations about our relationship to Christ and each other. Many books have been written about the theme 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 the

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parable originally given in those few minutes during Holy Week when the disciples were on the path from the Cenacle to Gethsemane. Given the parable of the vine and the branches, we realize the natural laws of botany we see displayed around us are a reflection of the higher supernatural bond between Christ and His Church.

A branch of a vine has a certain freedom of movement. It can sway in the breeze; it produces leaves; it can grow in a certain direction. The branch also has a 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. If it did not participate in the life of the vine the branch would die. It is totally dependent upon the vine for its well-being. The vine is not dependent upon the branch to nearly the same degree. Everything the branch accomplishes in the way of flowers, new green leaves, and fruit, would be impossible without the support system of the vine.

Nothing is more enduring in the teaching of the Lord than this parable, acted out in nature, not only in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, but also in the blaze of color we are enjoying right now in springtime Boston, in our parks, campuses, cemeteries, and our own back yards.

Those who are bound to Christ realize their lives are continuous with His and that we are bound by higher laws of being and love. With His grace, we strive to respond to do certain things He asks and avoiding certain other things. We act 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. Just like the branch of the vine, you and I are part of the larger whole. And yet at the same time, our relationship with Jesus is not duplicated anywhere else. A soul is not a stick or a twig, but a precious and unique individual in Christ's eyes, now and forever.