

STAYING CONNECTED TO JESUS: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER B

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You will have noticed that every time the gospel is proclaimed in church it is presented as '*according to*'. Each gospel writer sees the same Jesus, but with different eyes. Our message about him today is '*according to John*'.

John's Jesus presents the metaphor of the vine and the branches to describe the intimate relationship between himself and his followers. He is the true vine, his Father is the vine grower (15:1) and we are the branches attached to him (15:5). Only if we remain connected to him and he with us will we bear fruit, i.e. lead good, meaningful, useful, productive and worthwhile lives (15:4). What counts for John, then, is closeness to Jesus and friendship with him.

There are all kinds of ways in which this happens, but it is happening where we are right here, right now. It is happening in our liturgy, our shared prayer, our Eucharist.

It cannot be emphasised enough that liturgy is simply people praying, people praying together the prayer of their Church, i.e. its official prescribed prayer. As such, it is something we do. But even more it is something which God does.

What God does in liturgy continues what God has already done in history. This is his work of saving (i.e. transforming) human beings. This reached its climax in the living, dying and rising of Jesus. '*God so loved the world,*' says St John, '*that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*' (3:16).

When God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, he let loose among us the same power that animated Jesus from the cradle to the grave. This is the power of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit! The power that enriched his relationships! The power that led him to keep on loving God and God's people! The power that spurred him into doing good - helping and healing wherever he could (see Acts 10:38)! The power that brought to others the understanding and compassion, the kindness, comfort and healing of God! The power that forgave their sins, relieved their guilt, and gave them a brand new start! The power and joy of his on-going presence, friendship and support!

It's this very same Spirit of God that our Saviour keeps giving us when we pray together at liturgy. He does not and will not leave us as we are. His Spirit keeps refreshing, renewing and transforming our lives. Slowly but surely we become more and more like Jesus. So liturgy has been called '*an encounter with Christ in the fullness of his redeeming activity*'.

To speak this way is to speak of liturgy as gift, as grace. But what God is doing in liturgy is only side of the picture. There is also our response to the presence and action of God working within and among us – our response of praise, thanksgiving, sorrow, petition, lament, self-offering, etc.

Liturgy as both gift and response takes shape as a dialogue, a conversation with God. On the one hand God keeps assuring us of his presence and love. On the other hand we respond with gratitude and faith, with trust and love.

It may be seen, then, that the pattern of liturgy parallels the pattern of the life, work and prayer of Jesus our Saviour: - To the Father, through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit! In the conclusion of our every Eucharistic Prayer we explicitly acknowledge this as the pattern of our lives, work and prayer as well. We say: *'Through him, with him, and in him, O God Almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, for ever and ever. AMEN.'*

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