Homily of Fifth Sunday of Easter Year B, 2021

Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22:26-28, 30-32; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

The first reading tells us St. Paul's experience after his conversion. He had escaped from Damascus where the Jews wanted to kill him for preaching and "proving that [Jesus] is the Messiah" (Acts 9:20-25). He arrived in Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples, "but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:27-28).

First, St. Paul was a notorious persecutor and murderer of Christians. When he converted, he put his past life behind him, and never allowed the guilt and shame of his past life to discourage him from answering the call of evangelization. Sometimes, God wants to do new things in our life, but we refuse to cooperate with God's grace by letting ourselves be trapped in our ugly past life. St. Paul's ability to break with his ugly past life challenges us to break the chains of our ugly past life and liberate ourselves from them. The word of God says in Isaiah 43:18-19, "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not. See, I am doing something new!" Let us embrace the new things God is doing and move forward.

Secondly, Barnabas intervened in St. Paul's situation and became an instrument for St. Paul's acceptance and establishment. Let us not be like the Jews who wanted to kill St. Paul because he was no longer a member of their murderous gang, or like the disciples who refused to accept him because they were afraid of him. Perhaps, we are the 'Barnabas' God wants to use to help someone to have life, or to establish someone, or to make someone progress. Let us not refuse to help or be reluctant to help. St. John urges us in the second reading, "[God's] commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23).

Thirdly, the acceptance of St. Paul by the apostles when Barnabas brought him to them reminds us the acceptance of the prodigal son by his father when he returned (Luke 15); and teaches us to do the same. Writing from his experience, St. Paul says in Colossians 3:13, "Put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, to bear with one another and forgive whenever there is any opportunity to do so. As the Lord has forgiven you, forgive one another." Let no one be a stumbling block to opportunities of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and unity.

St. Paul is a fulfillment of today's gospel reading. When he was outside Jesus, he was possessed by the spirits of hate, jealousy, fury, persecution, murder, and so on. But when he was grafted to Jesus, the true vine, and was pruned of his vices, he began to bear much fruit. Jesus says in the gospel, "Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

In the same way, when we take ourselves away from Jesus, we unite ourselves with the Evil One, we become possessed by the Evil One's spirits, and we become instruments of his works. But if we are united with Jesus, we bear fruits of his Spirit; which are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Then, Jesus' words become fulfilled in us: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (John 15:7-8). May we remain in him, and become fruitful, and multiply (Genesis 1:28). Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP