

Our Sunday Readings

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 9:26-31
 PSALM 22:26-28, 30-32
 I JOHN 3:18-24
 JOHN 15:1-8

The True Vine

ACTS 9:26-31

Reading closely

1. Why might Saul have gone to Jerusalem?
2. Why are Jesus' followers afraid of Saul?
3. How does Barnabas change things?
4. What might Barnabas have said to the disciples?
5. How might Saul have explained his conversion to Christ?
6. Why might the Hellenists have reacted violently to Saul?
7. Why do the disciples send Saul away?
8. How has Saul's situation changed over time?
9. What is happening to the church?
10. What is the role of the holy Spirit?

Living the word

11. Have you ever undergone a change of heart that was hard for others to accept?
12. When have you found it hard to accept a good change in someone else?
13. Have you ever acted as an advocate or mediator?

THE FIRST READING

An unlikely convert

In Acts 8:1-3 we learn that a man named Saul is aggressively persecuting the church. When Saul has an encounter with the risen Jesus, however, he converts (9:1-19). We know him now as Paul.

After a period of formation, Saul begins proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah. His bold words provoke people to try to kill him, so he flees. The Christians in Jerusalem hesitate to accept Saul since he once attacked them.

From Jerusalem

Passages in the Jewish scriptures foretold that God would establish his kingdom among his chosen people first and then bring the Gentiles into it. By noting Saul's visit to the heart of Judaism, Luke shows God fulfilling his promises. Luke also portrays a church united in its mission.

Endangered

Saul, who dragged Christians out of their homes to imprison them (8:3), is now himself cast out and persecuted. This experience is only the first step of the suffering he will endure for the sake of God's name (9:16).

JOHN 15:1-8

Reading closely

1. What is the relationship between a vine and its branches?
2. What are some “false” vines to which people attach themselves?
3. What all could the word *fruit* mean?
4. What *word* (or teaching) has Jesus spoken?
5. How does God *prune* people?
6. What are some reasons branches don’t bear fruit?
7. What do you imagine happening to the branches that don’t bear fruit?
8. How are we, the branches, to pray?
9. What word or phrase from this passage most resonates with you?

Living the word

10. How does Jesus *remain in you*?
11. What are you doing to make sure you *remain in Jesus*?
12. Does this passage challenge you to think differently about how you pray?

THE GOSPEL READING

Vines & vineyards

Prophets in the Old Testament readily compared Israel to God’s vine or vineyard. Some notable examples are Psalm 80:9-20, Isaiah 5:1-7, and Ezekiel 19:10-14. Although God planted and protected his vine Israel, the people did not always uphold his laws. In punishment God allowed his people to be attacked and even uprooted. Jesus is the faithful vine that will flourish forever.

Remaining

Jesus speaks these words to his disciples during his final meal with them. In the passage right before this one he assures them that although he’s about to leave them, he’ll send them the holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit will help believers to remain part of the true vine.

To remain part of the vine is to become one with the Father because Jesus and the Father are one. Since the Father alone is the *vine grower*, only by remaining in Jesus can a person bear fruit.

Pruning

There are two types of branches: those that are entirely cut off and those that are trimmed in such a way that new buds will grow and produce fruit. Those who reject Jesus are the branches that are entirely removed. Those who believe in Jesus remain part of the vine, but they need help to become stronger, more faithful, and more productive disciples.

Praying as one

The disciples are entirely dependent on Jesus, who, for his part, has entirely entrusted himself to his Father. Just as Jesus perfectly does God’s will and so is heard by his Father, so will God hear the prayers of Jesus’ disciples, as long as their prayers flow from their love for and commitment to Jesus.

Glorifying God

God’s intention in creating the world was that all people, all creation, would be in perfect love and unity. Such a perfect world would reflect the goodness of the God who created it. God is thus glorified whenever people treat one another with sincere love. Since Jesus is the symbol of perfect love, those who believe in him and live as he taught glorify God.

PRAYER

adapted from St. Cyril of Alexandria

God our Father,
 we are the branches
 growing from the vine that is Jesus.
 We draw life from your Son.
 We cling to your living Word.
 Eager to safeguard our new birth,
 we welcome the holy Spirit who dwells within us,
 who unites us to your Son,
 and through your Son, to you.
 Through your Spirit in us
 help us grow in love and faithfulness.
 Teach us to discern right from wrong
 and to act with integrity.
 Only in you will our lives bear fruit.
 Amen.