

Easter 5B (5/10/09 – *Joined to Christ's Death & Resurrection in W&S*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Well, what a blessed concurrence of secular and churchly themes – much more than you might think at first. In the world today is *Mother's Day* – one day in the year set aside to celebrate and give thanks to Mom and show her our appreciation for all that she has done and still does for us. In the Church on this *Fifth Sunday of Easter* we hear about the conversion and Baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch ... we hear about loving one another since God has first loved us and because He is love itself ... and we hear about Christ the life-giving True Vine into Whom we are grafted through Baptism and faith as fruitful, living branches. It is a blessed concurrence I say. *But how do Mother's Day and the Word we've heard concur?*, you ask. In these ways:

First, when we think of mothers – when the world thinks of mothers – we and they think of selfless and self-giving love. And this is not without reason ... as far as it goes. Mothers certainly are quite often fine examples of selfless, self-giving love – and it is certainly a good thing to honor our mothers on this day ... since God's Fourth Commandment enjoin us to do just that not only today but **every** day ... and since we are to think on and set before us such things as are lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise [PHP 4.8]. But if we are honest with ourselves, we probably cringe more than just a little bit when we hear the things we did in our *Epistle* ... like: *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ... or Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God ... or If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God Whom he has not seen. ... or this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. ... or Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* [1JN 4.7-9,11,20-21] We cringe because God lays out for us very clearly what we ought to be doing if we claim to know and love God. And we know we haven't been the loving mother we ought to be – I say **we**, because even those of us who are **not** mothers are to love ... whether or not we have children. And whether or not you are a mother, we all know that we have **not** loved as we ought – we have not loved God as we ought ... we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Our love constantly falls short of what it should be. We are not always selfless – in fact, rarely truly selfless. We are not always self-giving – we want things **our** way. And even when, by the grace of God, we manage to muster up love ... we are often quite disappointed (even resentful) when it is not reciprocated ... when it is not acknowledged and appreciated (except, perhaps, once a year) ... or most especially when our love is disdained or requited with rejection and even meanness.

The second blessed concurrence is when we hear about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. And the point of overlap here between *Mother's Day* and the Word appointed for this day has to do with birth – or, more precisely, birth and new birth. In His midnight conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says: ***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*** [JN 3.5-6] Just as mothers are the God-given way to be born into this world – for which we give them thanks and literally owe them our lives – so it is that the God-given way to be born into the kingdom (born anew, from above) is by the Holy Spirit working through Word and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Notice in our *First Reading* that the two go hand in hand – as Jesus says: ***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*** [MT 28.19-20] Word and Sacrament – Baptism and the Word – go hand in hand and must never be separated. We baptize and teach ... teach and baptize. That is the work of the Church ... that She might be God's instrument in bringing the new birth to children of God. For that reason the Church has been characterized as the Mother Who gives birth to all believers in the womb of the Font and then nurtures God's children by Word and Sacrament – that we might grow up in the fear and admonition of the Lord ... until we reach full maturity when we are emancipated from this life and brought into the joys of heaven.

The third and final blessed concurrence is when we hear about Christ as the true Vine – and how it is that, grafted into Him, we receive from Him life and bear fruit. For just as an infant is quite literally grafted into her Mother ... receiving all his nourishment through the umbilical cord as he floats safely in the waters of the womb – so are we quite literally grafted into the side of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as a branch to Him Who is the True Vine ... that we might receive from Him the gift of life ... and continue in that life ... nourished from His holy wounds by which He purchased for us the Gospel of our forgiveness and salvation ... strengthened as He constantly feeds us with Himself in Word and Sacrament ... indeed, with His very Body and Blood in the Holy Supper.

Sadly, like rebellious children – whether in our “terrible-twos” or as older “teenagers” – we often try to do things on our own ... our own way ... according to our own childish (indeed, foolish and sinful) thoughts ... apart from the Word and will of God. We rip ourselves from the Vine – as if we could live and bear fruit on our own ... tend ourselves and nourish ourselves **by** ourselves ... without God ... without Christ ... without His Word ... without His Sacraments. But our Lord Jesus is quite clear in our *Gospel*: ***As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me ... for apart***

from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [JN 15.4-6] Apart from Christ we cannot be born. Apart from Christ we cannot live. Apart from Christ we cannot grow. Apart from Christ we cannot bear fruit. If we do not abide in Him – constantly and continually abide in Him ... and **only** in Him – we are destined to be thrown away, wither, and then be gathered and tossed into the eternal fire to burn.

And if we press the analogy of Christ as the Vine and us as the branches, we can only conclude that we are quite doomed. For we have quite often torn ourselves away from our True Vine – by our sins of not loving selflessly ... by our sins of not loving at all ... by our sins of failing to honor our mothers ... by our sins of neglecting Christ's Word. And a branch has no power to reattach itself to the vine – **we** have no ability to reattach ourselves to Christ the True Vine. Thus, all would seem hopeless.

Ah, but let us not forget the Vinedresser in our Lord's Words. ***I am the True Vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser.*** [JN 15.1] Whenever by our sin we rip ourselves from Him Who is our life, the Father comes along and as a loving, skillful, Master-Vinedresser carefully reattaches us to the Vine ... to His Son. He brings the Word into our lives – as He did through Philip to the Ethiopian – first to remind us how we have murdered ourselves ... then to turn our hard, dry hearts back to Him in repentance faith. And in and through that Word the Holy Spirit is constantly working – like a trained nursemaid – to nurse us back to spiritual health ... using the life-giving and life-sustaining medicine and balm of His trade.

And notice that it is always by the **Word** that the Vinedresser-Father, the Vine-Son, and the Holy Spirit are working. The Ethiopian is reading from the scroll of Isaiah – reading the inspired **Word** of God. It is through the **Word** of Philip – prompted by the Holy Spirit – that the eunuch comes to understand that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God Who was denied justice and slaughtered on the Cross to take away the sins of the world. It is by the **Word** connected to the element of water that makes Holy Baptism an efficacious washing away of sin and gives new birth into the kingdom of God by the Holy Spirit [TIT 3.5]. It is by the **Word** that we are to *test the spirits to see whether they are from God* – whether from the **Word** they confess *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* [1JN 4.1]. It is by the **Word** that we know that God has *first loved us* ... so that we may love as He has commanded us in His **Word** – whether as mother ... father ... spouse ... child ... or neighbor. It is by the **Word** of Christ that we are cleansed from all unrighteousness and make clean and healthy and fruitful – as Christ says: *already you are clean because of the WORD that I have spoken to you* [JN 15.3]. It is by the **Word** – by the bare **Word** ... and the **Word** in the Sacraments – that we abide

in Christ and He in us.

And thus *Joined to Christ's Death and Resurrection in Word and Sacrament*, we are constantly receiving the Life of Christ our True Vine – which flows in us to give us forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation ... which flows in us so that we bear the fruits of repentance, faith toward God, and fervent love toward one another.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]