

St. Mark (tr.) (30 April 2023)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”

+In the Name...

For those of you who were expecting the Third Sunday of Easter, my apologies are in order. I try not to move feasts around, but because I was away at Synod for our Patronal Feast Day on Tuesday, it seemed doubly worthwhile to move it to the next Sunday. I am within the canons of the Church to affect such a move, but if you are still worried, I received the approval of our bishop ordinary, just to be on the safe side! For the record, the Evensong on St. Mark's Day in the chapel of the provincial seminary was glorious. So today is merely Part Two.

It seems that our patronal feast day, our Feast of Title, as it is known in Mother England, should be a day to rally around the Parish, our faith, and to celebrate. In order to celebrate we would need to feel good about ourselves, or at least about what we are doing in our Parish community. Yet our lessons

hardly let us rest on our laurels: they give us work to do, leaving little time for rest or celebration.

Starting with our Collect, we ask God to instruct us with “heavenly doctrine.” That phrase might seem provocative to some. I was at an organist event a couple of weeks ago where I heard one of the attendees remark, “Well, religion is man-made.” Perhaps, but the Faith of Holy Mother Church comes to us from God through the Scriptures and Holy Tradition. Some of you may remember the verbiage once included on the front of our bulletins: I cannot remember the exact wording, but it had something to do with Miss Percival having donated generously in order to maintain the “Faith once delivered to the Saints.” We are not to change what we believe based on the latest fads or what the secular world tells us should be fashionable, but to believe what the Church has always taught. Our somewhat tumultuous recent history shows the Parish’s tenacity in its bid to maintain the teachings of the Church Catholic, as Anglicanism has received them. When our spiritual home for the lion’s share of the life of this Parish began to be more interested in contemporary issues than the ancient Faith, the Parish chose to part ways with Her. When the

leaders our next spiritual home thought we needed to align ourselves with the Roman Church, the Parish reiterated its position in the Traditional Anglican camp. And when a move was made to align the Parish with Eastern Orthodoxy, once again the membership had to say, “Not so.” So the winds blew in an attempt to change the direction of the Parish, yet she remained firm. But is that enough? Now what?

We have a beautiful building. We have beautiful music. We have a liturgy that has fed the faithful for generations. But the Faith is not a spectator’s sport. St. Paul is not telling the Ephesians, “If you find yourself super-talented, you may help the Church, otherwise just sit on the side.” No, “unto EVERY ONE of us is given grace according to the measure of the gif of Christ.” EVERY ONE. Not some of us. Not most of us. But EVERY ONE of us. Talents come in all shapes and sizes, some requiring more of a time commitment than others. Most of us are not going to be able to play the organ as well as Ron. Most of us will not sing as well as Tom. But many of can sing in the choir. Most of us will not start famous schools like Bl. Nathaniel Woodard or St. John Baptist de le Salle, but many of us could teach a Sunday school

class. Not all of us can organize a tea like Bettyrose, but any of us can buy cookies at the grocery store for coffee hour. Not all of us can garden, but I bet most of us could learn to arrange flowers for God's altar. The key is finding what you can do well that will help the Church. Ideally it is something that you enjoy, or at least rewards you spiritually.

So now that God has given us work to do, He tells us that just doing the work is not enough, but it should give us fruit too. I made mention in a recent sermon of the many agricultural examples Our Lord used, and this is no exception. But as I argued then, the concepts conveyed are not rocket science. Even though we are not horticulturists, we can see the problem in spending our valuable time cultivating a plant and then not gaining anything from it. And for us, it is just the frustration of wasting our time and money. Many of the hearers of Jesus' words were dependent on a successful harvest either to feed their families, or to sell to others, in order that they could feed their families. (Hunger is an effective motivator!)

Priests often take these words from our Gospel reading to heart on a personal level: if attendance is up, "Hey, we are doing a great job!" But if

attendance is down, we know we will be judged by our fruits.” But it is not necessarily that simple. No priest can single-handedly grow a parish. The faithful have to help; they work together as a team. Any rowing fans in the crowd? The priest is like the coxswain in the crew boat: he gives instruction because he has a vision of where the boat is headed. The oarsmen provide the feet on the ground, so to speak; maybe the feet in the shell in this case. But without the oarsmen, the coxswain is just sitting in an empty boat yelling her fool head off. Without the faithful I am literally preaching to the choir.

My parents were not big gardeners, but I remember them pruning the few apple trees every year that we had in our back yard. In order to get those beautiful, tasty apples for pies, cobblers and applesauce, the tree had to have the unhealthy parts removed. Even though it was smaller, what was left was healthier, allowing it to grow and produce more fruit the next summer.

Brethren, this is where we are now. It would be easy to look around and get discouraged because our numbers are not where they were 30, 20, or even 10 years ago. But Our Lord promises in the words of St. John that if we abide in

Him, continue in His love, and keep His commandments, He will do what we ask insofar as it brings glory to the Father.

We do not have to be the best. We do not have to be the greatest. We have to be faithful. St. Mark accompanied St. Paul and then St. Barnabas. Later he was an assistant to St. Peter. No, he is not as famous as St. Peter or St. Paul, but that was not his calling. He was faithful and served as He was called. What is God calling you to do, brethren? (Notice I did not ask, “Are you being called?”) How is God calling you to be a modern-day St. Mark?

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