



BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22 (21); 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

My Father is honoured by this, that you bear much fruit and show that you are my disciples

John 15:1 [Jesus said:] I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. 2 He takes away every branch that does not bear fruit in me. He prunes every branch that bears fruit so that it will bear more fruit. 3 You are clean already because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.

John 15:5 I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown out like a branch, and dries up; and such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, and are burned up. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is honoured by this, that you bear much fruit and show that you are my disciples.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Like all the speeches in this Gospel, this is a meditation on the presence of the Risen Lord to believers, written after the resurrection and thus not really a report of Jesus' actual words. Nevertheless, it is a meditation on images Jesus did actually use, such as the parable of the vineyard, with echoes of other passages from the Old Testament. This passage indeed sounds a bit like a parable but is really a symbolic allegory, wherein each element can be "decoded" for meaning. This reflection is found in the Farewell Discourse of the Fourth Gospel and is best understood within that special context.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The imagery of the vineyard is used in the Old Testament to express God's relationship with Israel, both positively and

negatively.

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. (Psalms 80:8-13)

Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine? (Jeremiah 2:21)

When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them. (Jeremiah 8:13)

Then he took a seed from the land, placed it in fertile soil; A plant by abundant waters, he set it like a willow twig. It sprouted and became a vine spreading out, but low; Its branches turned toward him, its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine; it brought forth branches, put forth foliage. (Ezekiel 17:5-6)

Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. (Hosea 10:1)

KIND OF WRITING

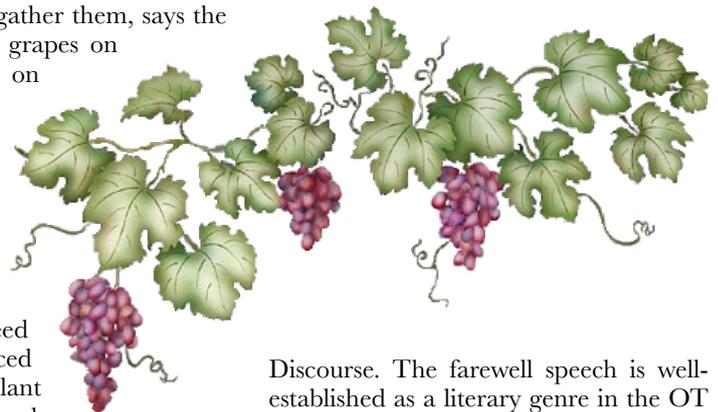
John 13-17 is known as the Farewell

Thought for the day

In the Bible, things from everyday life are used to speak of God. Two good examples would be those staples of the Mediterranean, the olive and the vine. In particular, the vine lends itself to metaphorical reference. It takes great tending; at the same time, it is obvious that even the furthest tendril "must with the vine be one." By staying connected and with careful pruning, the fruit itself is "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). No need to mention the wine!

Prayer

Help us, farmer God, to be one with the true vine, Christ our Lord. May the difficult experiences which prune us make us more abundant in the fruits of the Spirit, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Amen.



Discourse. The farewell speech is well-established as a literary genre in the OT and the apocryphal books of the inter-testamental period. For example, Deuteronomy is the farewell discourse of Moses. In these chapters of the Fourth Gospel there are many allusions to Deuteronomy. This is one way in which the Evangelist sees Moses as a helpful way of understanding the significance of Jesus. The common situation in farewell speeches is that of a prominent person who gathers his followers (children, disciples, or the entire nation of Israel) just before his death or departure to give them final instructions which will help them after he is gone.

III. THE BOOK OF GLORY

(13:1-20:31)

- A. *The Last Discourse* (13:1-17:26)
- i. Making God known: the foot-wash and the morsel (13:1-38)
 - ii. Departure (14:1-31)
 - iii. To abide, to love, and to be hated (15:1-16:3)
 - iv. Departure (16:4-33)
 - v. Making God known: Jesus' final prayer (17:1-26)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(1) Then he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." (Mark 12:1-9)

(2) Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. (Mark 14:25; see also Matt 26:29; Luke 22:18).

(3) The Wedding Feast of Cana, with the excess of wine is an important link in this Gospel (John 2:1-11).

ST PAUL

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.

Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Romans 11:17-24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 "I am" echoes the name of God from Exodus 3:14. There are seven significant "I am" sentences in this Gospel, such as the bread of life, the light of the world, resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life.

Verse 2 Continuing the language of horticulture, the vine grower "prunes" the vine, that is, he cuts back in order to encourage even greater fruitfulness.

Verse 3 The metaphor is abandoned briefly to make it clear that the (spiritual) pruning is brought about by Jesus' teaching. Cleansed was already used, significantly, in John 13:10-11, at the washing of the feet.

Verse 4 "Abide" has a special force and frequency (John 1:32-33, 38-39; 2:12; 3:36; 4:40; 5:38; 6:27, 56; 7:9; 8:31, 35; 9:41; 10:40; 11:6, 54; 12:24, 34, 46; 14:10, 17, 25; 15:4-7, 9-10, 16; 19:31; 21:22-23). It expresses that deep spiritual intimacy between Jesus and the believer. See the very next verses: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." (John 15:9-10). The vinicultural imagery is then resumed. Anyone who has seen a vine knows that the branches must stay attached to the main root, otherwise they are cut off from the very source of life.

Verse 5 This verse opens with a repeat of v.1, but the imagery moves forward "you are the branches". 5b and 5c say the same thing, positively and negatively.

Verse 6 This verse uses "fire" to talk about the consequences of being cut off: that is judgement at the end.

Verse 7 Moving on from the threat in v. 6, the writer explores the benefits of staying attached to the vine. It echoes the Synoptic teaching "ask and you will receive", but makes clear the condition for successful prayer, abiding in him. If we do abide in him, then what we desire will be whatever it the Risen Lord himself wants to give us.

Verse 8 "Glory" in this gospel means the unveiling of the true identity of God as love in the cross. By their being pruned, the disciples too experience trial but by their faithfulness to Jesus they too unveil God's true identity and thus share in the very ministry of Jesus.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In a relationship connectedness is important. Relationships cannot be taken for granted and need time and care to be life-giving. What does your experience tell you of the truth of this in your relationships with God, with your friends, with your family, with communities or groups to which you belong?

2. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit". In what ways do you see that you have been 'pruned' by the experiences of life, or by the word of God, to be a more fruitful person? Perhaps you have also experienced the need for "pruning" in significant relationships in your life.

3. The parable also reminds us that we are not the source of our own life. It is a gift from God, from our parents, and from all who have nourished

us. Give thanks for those who have been a source of life for you.

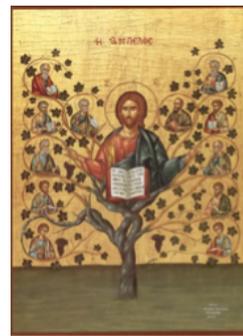
4. God is glorified by our being fruitful. When has human fruitfulness reminded you of God at work in our world?

PRAYER

O God, you graft us on to Christ, the true vine, and, with tireless care, you nurture our growth in knowledge and reverence.

Tend the vineyard of your Church, that in Christ each branch may bring forth to the glory of your name abundant fruits of faith and love.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit God for ever and ever. Amen.



The person who keeps his commandments resides in God

1 John 3:18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue but in deed and truth. 19 And by this we will know that we are of the truth and will convince our conscience in his presence, 20 that if our conscience condemns us, that God is greater than our conscience and knows all things. 21 Dear friends, if our conscience does not condemn us, we have confidence in the presence of God, 22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing to him. 23 Now this is his commandment: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he gave us the commandment. 24 And the person who keeps his commandments resides in God, and God in him. Now by this we know that God resides in us: by the Spirit he has given us.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There is a very strong push in 1 John to ensure that our faith should become reality in deeds. This is really an evolution from the prophetic world of the Old Testament. The prophets regularly attack those who think once worship is “done”, that is sufficient. In 1 John, the problem is more insidious: once being loved has come a reality, then, we might think, that is sufficient. In a word, love which is not being being lived and passed on has somehow not lodged in us.

In the original teaching of Jesus, there is something very similar: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* (Matthew 6:14-15) This is not simply some *quid pro quo*. More deeply reflected upon, the forgiveness what God always wants to give us *can* be ours only if we ourselves are people who in turn forgive.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The reality in the community must have been the constant human temptation to separate spirituality and practice, worship and justice. It is not unknown in our own day.

KIND OF WRITING

Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-4)

I. God is light (1:5-2:27)

II. God is righteous 2:18-4:6)

III. God is love (4:7-5:12)

Epilogue: Assurances (5:13-21)

There are subsections in II above:

A. Good right / avoiding sin (2:28-3:10)

B. Love / the New Covenant (3:11-24)

C. The Spirit of Deceit (4:1-6)

RELATED PASSAGES

Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1John 4:20-21)

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1John 4:11-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18 The verse opens with the typical and affectionate address “little children.” A good contrast is set up word / tongue and deed / truth. The point is not just the moral follow-through but the integration of our whole self in light of the Gospel. Truth, in the Johannine tradition, also points to Jesus as himself the way, the truth and the life. All who are in the truth which is Jesus live consistently with their convictions.

Verses 19-20 The sentiments here may not seem that clear at first glance. He has in mind here the feeling that somehow we are not fully forgiven. The cure for such “scrupulosity” is to remember that God knows us better than we do ourselves and he forgives us. Throughout, the writer is not using the word “conscience” but the word “heart.” The heart is the seat not of the emotions but of the mental life, its will and decisions.

Verses 21-22 The writer looks at another case, in which our conscience is at peace. In that case, we can have confidence before God.

Verse 23 The two realities are inseparable. We are empowered to love because he loved us first; but in that very self-same love we are also to love our brothers and sisters. See above under related passages.



Verse 24 The word reside / abide is very similar to my word above “lodge.” It really means finding my deep identity in love. As the song puts it, the greatest thing you’ll ever learn is to love and be loved in return. The role of the Spirit in Johannine spirituality is precisely to place in believers’ hearts the love of God as found in the paschal mystery, Jesus’ death and resurrection. Cf. *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* (1John 4:13) *This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.* (1John 5:6-8)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is my own experience of integrating faith and life? It is always something of a struggle and at times we do fail. How to I pick up the pieces again? What keeps me going?
2. The inseparability of love of God and love of neighbour is both life-giving and challenging. It really is the one love and I really cannot have the one without the other. When did I myself become aware of this in an existential, personal way?
3. To have my home in God, my deep belonging, is the goal of the spiritual journey. In Kavanagh’s brilliant poem *Beyond the Headlines*, he writes, “Only those who fly home to God have flown at all.”
4. In the great spiritual tradition, prayer is nothing other than assenting to the presence of the Spirit within. We don’t establish or set up the relationship; it is all grace and our role is to say *yes* with our hearts and *yes* with our lives.

PRAYER

God of life and God of love, you call us lovingly into being that we come to know you and be like you in love. Help us to say yes to your love, to your Spirit within. Help us to love our neighbour with one and selfsame love. Amen.

Paul was speaking and debating with the Greek-speaking Jews

Acts 9:26 When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to associate with the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took Saul, brought him to the apostles, and related to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he was staying with them, associating openly with them in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He was speaking and debating with the Greek-speaking Jews, but they were trying to kill him. 30 When the brothers found out about this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and thus was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the church increased in numbers.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our story today follows the first of three accounts in Acts of the “conversion” of Saul. Levels of irony are apparent in the passage. The Hellenists, in this case, were really Jews who spoke Greek, a bit like Paul himself. His “turning” must have disconcerted them and, again like Saul himself, their reaction is quite murderous.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Integration / acceptance is the issue.

KIND OF WRITING

Acts presents the reader with no fewer than *ten* conversion stories: 2:1-47; 3:1-4:4, 32-37; 8:4-25; 8:26-40; 9:1-31; 10:1-48; 13:6-12; 13:13-52; 16:11-15; 16:25-34. From the evidence derived from conversion accounts found in pagan sources, Jewish materials, and the Christian apocryphal Acts, it is possible to isolate five stable components in these ancient conversion stories: (a) the context; (b) the catalysts leading to conversion; (c) the counter-forces that pose an obstacle or opposition; (d) the conversion itself; (e) the confirmation of the genuineness of the conversion by post-conversion evidence (our verses today).

RELATED PASSAGES

In Luke-Acts, there are two kinds of disciples. (i) Those who were “with the Lord from the beginning” and are “with us” (Luke 8:1; 22:28; 24:44; Acts 1:21-22; 13:31). (ii) Those who are disciples on account of an experience of conversion. Paul, who symbolises those bearing witness out of vivid experience, was not ready to be used by Christ until he was vouched for by the Jerusalem apostles (i. e., his experience was deemed legitimate by the tradition). For Luke-Acts it is not either tradition or experience but rather both tradition and experience. Both are necessary to enable one to be an adequate witness for the Lord. Hence, markedly unlike Paul himself in Galatians, Luke requires apostolic approval for the likes of Paul.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 26 As noted by Paul himself, conversion and mission are really one experience. When Paul comes to Jerusalem, it is natural that those in Jerusalem should be nervous of the infamous persecutor. In Galatians, Paul says he met only Peter, so the story in Acts is difficult to reconcile with Paul in his own words.

Verse 27 Barnabas is mentioned earlier: There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (in Acts = “son of encouragement”). (Acts 4:36) He is an important figure in Acts: Acts 4:36; 9:27; 11:22, 25, 30; 12:25-13:2; 13:7, 42-43, 46, 50; 14:1, 12, 14, 20; 15:2, 12, 22, 25, 35-37, 39. In our story, he fulfils his name (son of encouragement). Eventually, he and Paul broke up after a row, which proved permanent. In a later visit, Paul challenges both Peter and Barnabas. NB in Luke-Acts, only the twelve are apostles (i.e. excluding Paul, who regularly calls himself an apostle).

Verse 28 This is in contrast to what Paul himself says in Galatians above. Speaking boldly is very important in the Acts: Acts 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 9:27-28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31. It is not always translated with the same English equivalent.

Verse 29 Hellenists has two meanings in Acts. (i) Christians like Stephen in Acts 6:1; (ii) Greek-speaking Jews such as those in Acts 21:27-29).

Verse 30 “Believers” here is the NRSV inclusive-language translation of “brothers/sisters”. This “escape” would be Paul’s second—the first being from Damascus: *but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.* (Acts 9:25). It is sharply ironic that Paul is saved from death by those whom he formerly persecuted. Caesarea Maritima is important in the Acts (Acts 8:40; 9:30; 10:1, 24; 11:11; 12:19; 18:22; 21:8, 16; 23:23, 33; 25:1, 4, 6, 13).

Verse 31 The word “church” here means not a particular congregation but the whole Christian movement as such. This is the only mention in Luke-Acts of Christians in Galilee. Luke’s real interest lies not in a complete history but in showing that the movement, which had started in Galilee reached its fulfilment in Jerusalem and, from there, spread to the known world. Summary statements on the spread of the church are sprinkled throughout Acts: 5:14, 6:7; 9:31, 11:21; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It can sometimes happen that after some major change in our outlook or personality, people who knew us previously are slow to recognise or trust our “conversion”. Conversely, we can be slow to accept such change in others. Yet, we hope such growth is really possible both for ourselves and for others.

2. Even a very courageous figure such as Paul needed the support and companionship of another. Who has supported me in my discipleship and ministry? To whom have I been a support?

3. The peaceful and uninterrupted growth sounds like the faraway, halcyon days of yore. And yet, today there are seeds of a new springtime for the church: the return to the Word, the commitment to discipleship and the experience of the Holy Spirit. Where do I experience such seeds of hope today?

PRAYER

God of new life, the experience of your Spirit give new courage and changes the direction of our lives.

Show us today how we are to be your witnesses that your church may know a new springtime of faith through the word of life proclaimed in our day.

Let us encourage one another, let us live in fear of the Lord, let us know the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

THE LITURGY

Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22 (21); 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8

READINGS 2 AND 3

Our second and third readings really do belong together, coming from the same spiritual world. We are called to abide in Jesus. The Gospel proclaims this as an invitation and a warning. The second reading goes into some depth about this abiding. It is a gift of grace but not at all “cheap grace” because it entails a conversation of heart and life, of the whole inner person.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalm excerpts might seem somewhat general, but the last verse seems to reflect the theme of proclamation:

And my soul shall live for him, my children serve him. They shall tell of the Lord to generations yet to come, declare his faithfulness to peoples yet unborn: ‘These things the Lord has done.’

These positive verses taken from Psalm 22 should be read in the context of the whole psalm. The psalmist is under tremendous threat and yet continues to be faithful, as in the story today.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Acts 9:26-31 Paul’s “welcome” to Jerusalem

Paul’s persecution of believers gained him a fearsome reputation. As you can imagine, this made it hard for people to welcome him wholeheartedly and his return to Jerusalem was, putting it mildly, uncomfortable. In particular, Greek-speaking Jews—the Hellenists—were so upset they wanted to kill him. Even for early Christians it wasn’t all light and joy...

Second reading

1 John 3:18-24 What God wants of us

Sometimes we wonder what is expected of us as disciples. In this wonderful reading the different dimensions of being a follower of Jesus are explored.

Gospel

John 15:1-8 The True Vine Discourse

Today’s Gospel is very like the second reading: how do we bear fruit as disci-

ples? Using the biblical metaphor of the vine, faith is presented as a relationship, dynamic and life-giving.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 4 May

Acts 14:5-18 Confusing the message and the messenger

Our reading comes from the account of Paul’s first missionary journey (13:1-14:28). Because of Jewish unbelief, the apostles turned regularly to the non-Jews or Gentiles. Sometimes, however, they were seriously misunderstood, and even taken to be “gods”. Of course, they were horrified.

Tuesday 5 May

Acts 14:19-28 A summary of activities

This is really a travel diary and all the places are in central southern Turkey today. However, built into the diary are significant experiences: persecution, encouragement, new openings for the faith.

Wednesday 6 May

Acts 15:1-6 Problems about the Jewish inheritance of Christianity

The Jewish faith is really the mother of the Christian faith. Even today there are “issues” in Jewish and Christian dialogue. These issues were present also at the birth of Christianity. The real question then was, How much of the mother religion should be retained? Some people said, nearly everything. Others, such as Paul, said that Christians should be free from such practices.

Thursday 7 May

Acts 15:7-21 Peter’s speech

How did the early Christians decide how much of the Jewish faith to keep? In this speech we hear an early community discussion really based on experience. In turn, that experience is understood in the light of early writings in the prophets.

Friday 8 May

Acts 15:22-31 The letter to the believers in Antioch

Today’s reading is made up of a very

carefully written letter, sent to the believers in Antioch in Syria. Like later church decisions, this document is something of a compromise. Even though the letter says nothing is to be imposed from the Jewish Law, nevertheless, they still hesitated about the dietary regulations.

Saturday 8 May

Acts 16:1-10 A travel summary ending with the move to Greece

Today we have another travel summary. As before, it is not just the places. In the account, significant experiences are described, including Paul’s vocation, in a dream, to preach the Gospel in Greece (Macedonia). This move was highly significant for the spread of the Gospel.

REFLECTIONS

Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.

The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others.

Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first.

No longer is it a question, then, of a “commandment” imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love.

Love is “divine” because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a “we” which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Benedict XVI *God is Love* §18