

5th Sunday of Easter (B)
(Acts 9:26-31 / John 15:1-8)
03.05.2015

Recently someone came to see me.

This person has been living a very committed Christian life for more than forty years. Over the past four decades she has been privileged to have had access to much spiritual formation. Indeed, she herself has served much of that time as a spiritual formator in the lay ecclesial movement in which she is engaged with her husband and most of her family.

On the day she came to see me, this woman shared that she had just received a profound spiritual insight. She said to me, as if this had only hit her for the very first time: *Father, I have just come to realise that of myself I can do nothing.* She went on to say: *I have made so many efforts over the years. I have tried so hard with my husband and my children and grandchildren. I have sought to be present to my wider family. I have been given as much as I possibly could be to the ecclesial movement to which we are engaged as a couple. It seems to me that the harder I have tried, the less I have succeeded.*

It was apparent that this woman's life had been somewhat of an uphill climb for far too long and she was feeling exhausted by it all.

The circumstances of our lives may be very different to that of the person to whom I refer, but I suspect many of us could identify with much of what she shared with me.

I am inclined to think that most of us *try* in life. Some of us may even try very hard. We make efforts. We strive to live committed lives. But, not withstanding our commitment to doing what is right, time and time again, we fail and fall and it as a result frequently we feel disappointed with ourselves.

To constantly come up against our weaknesses, our faults and flaws and failures, can be so disheartening.

I recall a word spoken to me one day, many years ago, by a rather dry old Redemptorist. He turned to me and said: *Remember, young Father, (I was younger then) what you are coming up against is called the law of gravity. There is something within all of us that just keeps pulling us down.*

It is into this reality, the situation of our lives, as they are, with that pull downwards which is forever at work within us that the Lord wants to speak this morning. It is aware of our recurrent weaknesses, that we hear one little line from today's gospel passage addressed to us. *Of yourself you can do nothing.*

Of ourselves we can do nothing!

That lady who came to see me and spoke of her experience so humbly, turned to me after a while and said: *Father Mark, tell me where am I?*

My spontaneous reply to her was that she was where we all are, where we all should be, each and every day: *at the starting line!*

As I listened to this woman's story, I thought of my own experience and that of so many people I encounter.

I also found myself thinking of the First Step of the famous Twelve Step Recovery programme. The First Step reads: *We admitted that we were powerless over our dependencies.*

This is a difficult admission to make. We struggle to admit that it is powerless that we find ourselves.

We admitted that we were powerless.

This realisation really is the starting point in every authentic spiritual programme.

As Jesus reminds us in today's gospel passage *cut of from me you can do nothing*.

However painful the awareness that of ourselves we can do nothing may prove to be, it is, in fact, a great grace to recognise our powerlessness.

We see this illustrated in the lives of so many of the great heroes of the faith.

Perhaps our greatest witness in this respect is the apostle Paul.

Paul speaks much of the experience of human weakness and even powerlessness. He sees these states of being which render us so vulnerable and needy as gifts of God's grace which make us all the more dependent upon the Lord.

Our powerlessness leads us to have to depend upon God's grace at work in our lives every step of the way.

Every time we come up against our weakness we realise the truth of Jesus' affirmation: *Without me you can do nothing*.

Hitherto his Damascus Road experience, Paul (still known then as Saul of Tarsus) imagined that he was in perfect control of his life. He also thought he was in control of everybody else's life.

He thought he was impeccable.

He was convinced of his self-righteousness.

He was filled with a spiritual pride which engendered bitter zeal. Religious smugness poisoned his life and hindered him from living truly merciful relationships.

Doubtless, Paul felt good about himself at this time, but in a bad way. He felt good about himself in an unhealthy sense.

It took Saul of Tarsus to be thrown to the ground and plunged into darkness and made experience the loss of control that went with this, for him to be brought into a good place spiritually.

Paul's temporary blindness was to prove to be the turning point of his life.

He needed to pass through this sombre tunnel to come into the full light of the truth. In that moment of darkness he traversed Paul was graced to receive a blessing of spiritual insight.

In order to become the truly powerful servant of Christ and the Christian gospel he became, the apostle had first of all to let go of his illusions of perfect control and power.

Paul's example encourages us to accept our own powerlessness. We need courage to do that.

Powerlessness is not easy for any of us to accept.

We are often afraid to admit that we have no control over things, including over our own lives.

Confronted with our powerlessness, we all so easily resort to various ploys to dodge this reality.

We sometimes take refuge in adopting an attitude of denial. We can try to convince ourselves that we are not as we really are.

Or again, we can try to avoid the truth of our nothingness by developing an inflated *ego*. This will often lead us to constantly try to prove that we are greater than we really are, making us obsessed with the idea of self-agrandissement/self-magnification.

Again, how easily we can allow ourselves to be led into a self-centred attitude in life.

We can imagine that we know everything and see clearly all the time. This can leave us under the

illusion that we are completely lucid, while actually having many blind spots around some very important issues. Blinded in this way, we will ignore the real needs of those around us.

Self-righteousness is another temptation that can haunt and deceive us. It can leave us feeling smug and self-satisfied, filled with delusions of spiritual grandeur.

What strain we put ourselves under if we live in any or all of the above ways!

Once we muster up the courage to admit to the fact that we are weak and powerless, however, and that of ourselves we can do nothing, we no longer have to pretend to others and/or to ourselves that we are perfect in every way and with that the terrible strain we place ourselves under subsides.

As a result we can start to live our real life.

We can let fall our *persona*: that image of ourselves we strive to project, but which is not the person we truly are.

Of course, Paul is not the only great figure of the New Testament to say that he could do nothing relying on his own force alone.

Jesus Himself declared that He could do nothing except that which the Father bid Him do.

Just as Jesus and the Father were one and all that Jesus accomplished He carried out in the Father's name, so we are called by Christ in today's gospel passage to live united with Him, grafted on to Him.

The point made for us today is that any good we accomplish, any fruit we are given to bear, is the result of our remaining *one with the vine*.

St Benedict reminds us of this in his Rule for Monks in the Chapter on the Tools of Good Works. Whatever good we accomplish is God's work within us

If I have been insisting on the idea that without Jesus we can do nothing that is good, this thought must nonetheless be qualified and properly understood.

I need to say a word about those who are not explicitly Christian, those who have no explicit reference to Christ in their lives, but who accomplish tremendous good.

We would be foolish not to recognise that there are many fine people who are not Christians who bear much good fruit in their lives.

Paul writes: *The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, good, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

Often people who are without Christian faith will bear more of these fruits of the Spirit than those who are committed Christians.

We might ask: What is the secret of these people? How do they manage to do this?

It seems to me that the secret of such people is that they are not centred on themselves alone.

To bear the fruits of the Spirit one must not be a self-centred person (in the negative sense of centred on self).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to our living lives of simple goodness, which touch others and impact upon them positively, is our tendency to be too greatly centred on ourselves.

Those who are self-centred in the sense of negatively selfish, are inclined to approach every

situation and every relationship with these questions in mind: *What is in this for me? How can I serve myself here?*

If we give into the temptation to approach matters in such a frame of mind, guided by a selfish attitude of heart, we actually stunt our growth and development, for we bypass something which today's gospel reminds us is necessary if we are to bear healthy fruit: that is, the pruning process!

Without cutting back on our *ego*, without allowing God, the gardener, to prune our lives, in ways that stimulate spiritual growth and fruitfulness, we will quickly grow *out of shape*. Indeed, so *out of shape* as to be unable to bear good, healthy fruit.

The gospel passage we heard also emphasises our remaining connected to Jesus, the true vine. If we are to bear fruit, we must be attached to Him more than to our *false self*.

The good fruit we are called to bear is genuine, unconditional love.

The verses which follow on from the *vine discourse* in John 15 make this point.

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Live within my love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with joy. Yes, your cup of joy will overflow! Love one another as much as I love you. And here is how to measure it - the greatest love is shown when a person lays down his life for his friends.

Good fruit in our lives overflows from the abundant love of God shown to us.

A good fruitful life is one that is given for others.

Fruit is yielded so that others may be nourished.

A fruitful life continually yields a harvest so that others may be fed.

Conversely, an unhealthy life is one in which relationships of love are spoiled by attitudes of selfishness which hold us back from living self-giving love.

Unhealthy fruit is the result of our empty self-centredness which we attempt to fill by using others (and even God at times) to our own end, without any real respect for them.

Only when we experience and remain in God's love will we arrive at the end to which we are called which is to offer unselfish love to others out of an overflowing heart.

It is as we draw life from Christ, the true vine, that we the branches are able to bear much fruit, the fruits of the Spirit.

The word at the heart of today's gospel passage which reminds us that of ourselves we can do nothing, must be coupled with the assurance that *with the Lord we can do all things, for nothing is impossible to God*.

Amen!