

Fifth Sunday of Easter

“I am the vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce anything.”

John 15, 1-8

What does it mean to you to be assured by Jesus that you are intimately connected to him? He uses the image of vine branches connected to sturdy stock for energy, nourishment and life, and goes on to make the point that even healthy-looking branches need to be pruned to ensure that high-quality fruit will ultimately be produced. Pruning can be painful. After all, it means cutting off luxuriant growth, and then seeming abandonment of the vine to lie fallow and lonely through the winter. None of us likes to be left alone, and we don’t like “having our wings clipped”. Yet whatever happens to us, Jesus assures us that he is intimately connected to us, and we to him. And that goes for all of us.

When I stop to reflect on my life’s journey, it does not take long to see that many of the absolutes I embraced in my youth have been modified, as have many of my beliefs. Remember when eating meat on Friday was categorised as “a mortal sin”, as was “doing unnecessary servile work on Sunday”? For generations, Catholics ate fish on Fridays, even after fish became more expensive than meat. Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons were shunned, divorced Catholics were treated as second-rate, and attendance at evensong with Anglicans was close to heresy. Now, we can allow ourselves to engage in discussing the pros and cons of voting for same-sex marriage, and welcoming divorced and remarried Catholics to participate in Eucharist.

In Australia last week, we were informed that China was not going to accept recycled metals to be imported from long-time trading partners. That led one large city council in Queensland to announce that its recycling programme would cease operation and recyclable materials would be used as land-fill. The reactions were many and varied. Some supported the council’s decision but many more protested it. As a result, the recycling programme has been reinstated.

If we care to look carefully at the parish communities, the clubs, the sporting and recreational groups to which we belong, we will quickly discover that there is a lot of polarisation among the members of those groups. In our churches, for example, we know that there are those who applaud our Government’s hard-line policy to deny entry to asylum-seekers who arrive by boat. Others rise up in protest at what they see as unjust, discriminatory policies and processes that deny asylum to refugees forced to flee war-zones in which Australian military forces have been engaged. Our parish communities are made up of those who oppose the mining and manufacture of fossil fuels and those whose consumption of fossil fuel for recreation and domestic appliances is seemingly extravagant. Some of us buy only locally produced food while others have no difficulty in buying asparagus from Peru, bananas from Ecuador, apples from New Zealand and oranges from the United States. Trade tariffs and restrictions matter little to them. Pipelines for oil and natural gas are seen by some of us as threats to the environment or an invasion of sites sacred to indigenous peoples. Others of us can’t even register what an ecological risk might be. Our varying attitudes to all these things can divide us to the extent that we can’t even converse with one another or even sit down in one another’s presence. Yet we are told that we are all intimately connected with Jesus and with one another - we

are all branches of the one vine, we're all together on the same journey. So there will always be a challenge to us to work at resolving the issues and attitudes that divide us.

But we're not the first to have to deal with communal divisions. Often, the first casualty of divided opinions is truth. We see that in political debates all over the globe. Today's first reading from *Acts* shows something of the bitter division in the early Christian community when Saul turned up after his conversion. He so alienated the Hellenists that they made up their minds to kill him. In the previous chapter of *Acts* we read the story of Philip baptising an Ethiopian eunuch - a powerful, black-skinned man who was in charge of the Queen of Ethiopia's treasury. And he was not the "normal", run-of-the mill, heterosexual male. It's an inspirational story to drive home the message that all are to be made welcome in the Christian community, whatever their biases, political allegiance or sexual orientation. Otherwise, the community simply cannot claim to be Christian. Our world and our Church will change for the better only when ALL are welcome, only when we are all prepared to support and encourage one another, despite our political views and our prejudices, only when we are really prepared to trust the source of all life - the risen Christ, the one to whom we want to be intimately connected and who is with us as we struggle with division and difference.

Fortunately, we can identify people in the human community whose example inspires us to work to resolve difference and division. The small East African countries of Rwanda and Burundi are sandwiched between Uganda and Tanzania. Rwanda became infamous in 1994 when its Hutu majority government initiated the slaughter of an estimated one million Tutsis, members of the resident minority tribe. Less is known of the civil war in Burundi in 1993 in which Tutsis murdered tens of thousands of Hutus. When the violence was rampant in Burundi, an exceptional woman by the name of Marguerite (Maggy) Barankitse set about rescuing children who were orphaned as a consequence of the civil strife. When the violence erupted, Maggy was already "mother" to seven children she had adopted, a mixture of Hutus and Tutsis. She and her children took shelter in a Catholic compound in the city of Ruyigi. When the rebels broke in, Maggy rushed to hide the children in church cupboards. Seventy-two Hutus were slaughtered on the spot, and the rampaging Tutsis wanted to kill her for protecting Hutu children. Because she was a Tutsi herself, they were afraid to kill her, but went away and forced some young Hutus to enter the compound to murder her. The young Hutus were under the impression that Maggy was a religious sister. Her quick reaction was to tell them that "Sister Maggy" had already fled. The young Hutus stripped Maggy and tried to force her to disclose where the children were hidden. When she refused, by saying: "I'd rather die than tell you where they are", they turned their attention to food. She bought them off by telling them where a supply of food was hidden. Before they left in search of the food, one of the Hutus untied her and gave her a T-shirt to cover her nakedness. When the ordeal was over, she discovered that she was now "mother" to twenty-five children. Maggy persuaded the Archbishop of Ruyigi to give her a disused school which she converted into an orphanage and named *House Shalom*. Since then, she has rescued, fed and educated more than 20,000 children. She is living testimony to how to dissolve division and to bring together in harmony Tutsi and Hutu children. She teaches life and love by modelling them both.