

Today we hear in the Acts of the Apostles of the emergence of a division within the Church. It is not trivial, but serious; and its adherents are not quietly brooding over it, but out on the mission, propagating their ideals in the wake of the apostles Paul and Barnabas.

They are the backlash to the infant Church's amazing U-turn, in which people like Simon Peter finds himself instructed in a dream to abandon Jewish food laws, and as a consequence begins to eat freely with Gentiles; a thing even Jesus would never have done in his life. The discovery of the identical spiritual experiences which typify the Church in its Jewish birthplace - that is, the Pentecost experiences - are so perfectly mirrored in the response of totally Gentile congregations, that the apostles can clearly see that the imposition of Jewish laws on new converts is unnecessary. The agonising of Paul over this conclusion can only be imagined; we see its effects in the tortured prose of his letters, as he desperately tries to justify the turning of his Pharisee back on laws and rules he had considered sacred and inviolable: the holy Law of God.

But the backlash has begun; and Jewish Christians are following Paul into Gentile congregations and insisting that they have themselves circumcised, adopt the Jewish dietary laws, and take up the Pharisee code of holiness, with endless washings, sacrifices for sin, and the rest. These men are called Judaizers, because they want to keep the Christian Church Jewish; they emanate from the same Jerusalem that sends out Paul and Barnabas, and their arrival in the cities of the empire provokes dismay and confusion.

In the Gospel we find the Church's spirituality on this matter expressed in the poetry of John's Gospel. The image is that of the all-important vine, to which all must belong, in whom all must inhere with total devotion. The Church is not a wavering human club which wanders amorphously through the world, not knowing what to think or how to grow or what to do. It is a plant with its own life and integrity, its own genetic programme, and it will bear fruit as long as it stays united. In the heart of this unity Christ is truly present, so that he says:

*I Am the vine; you are the branches*

No-one can remain part of the vine and keep a separate or contrasting agenda. You could never graft a parsnip plant into the vine, and produce a rampant crop of mid-air parsnips. All who are integrated into the vine by baptism will produce grapes; and all that does not produce grapes will be eliminated from the vine by the Father. So we may expect pruning to take place; and from the beginning John's writings have been aware of the bright blade which has cut out dead wood and eliminated harmful disease from the Church, a necessary surgery.

What we see in the readings today, therefore, is a warning to us, that whatever we trust and build into our lives must be coherent with our place in the vine which is Christ. If we build our lives on broken promises and injustice, on violence and cruelty, we cannot expect also to grow in fruitfulness for the harvest of God; and it is that ultimate vintage which will judge us, and set the path for our eternal destiny.