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Wednesday of the 5th Week of Easter

Date: Wednesday, May 21, 2025 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Acts 15:1–6
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 122:1–5 | **Response:** Psalm 122:1
Gospel Acclamation: John 15:4a, 5b
Gospel Reading: John 15:1–8
Preached at: the Chapel of the Most Holy Name, Kolvenbach House **in the** Archdiocese of Lusaka, Zambia**.**

Think of a time when your life took an unexpected turn—a job fell through, a relationship ended, an illness changed everything, or you were forced to start over in a new place—do you remember that feeling of being uprooted? That disorienting moment where what was familiar no longer worked, and you didn't yet know what would come next?

The early Church faced such a moment in today's readings. They stood at a crossroads, trying to discern how to grow beyond their roots without losing their soul. And the question before them was deeply personal and communal: must Gentile converts become fully Jewish—following the Law of Moses, including circumcision—to be truly Christian? At first glance, it may seem like an old religious squabble. But this was no small debate. It was a crisis of identity, of belonging, of what it meant to be God's people in a new time.

Here's the heart of it: for the Jewish followers of Jesus, the Law was sacred. It shaped their worship, their diet, their calendar, their very sense of who they were before God. Circumcision wasn't a bureaucratic box to tick—it was a covenant, a sign of fidelity going back to Abraham. To set it aside felt like abandoning the story God had written on their hearts.

And yet Paul and Barnabas had seen something that could not be denied: Gentiles who believed in Jesus were receiving the Holy Spirit—without the Law. They saw grace at work, breaking boundaries, blessing outsiders, and remaking the map of who belonged. Grace, in this context, isn't just unearned favor. It's the radical, generous love of God that goes ahead of us, that doesn't wait for us to get everything right, that welcomes before we're worthy. It doesn't ignore the past, but it refuses to be confined by it.

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So the apostles gathered in Jerusalem and chose courage over comfort. They chose unity over uniformity. They discerned that faith in Christ—not adherence to every line of the Law—was the foundation of belonging. They had to let go of old ways of thinking, realizing that God's love was not limited to those who followed every detail of the Law, and through that letting go, the Church grew.

And then we turn to Jesus' words in John's Gospel: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower." Let's pause here. Not just for metaphor. Picture it. A vineyard in full sun. Thick, twisting vines clinging to their trellises. The branches, tender and green, stretching outward, alive with leaves and heavy with fruit. You can almost smell the sweetness of the grapes.

And Jesus says, you are that branch. You are part of me. I nourish you. Without me, you cannot thrive. But here's the twist: even fruitful branches are pruned. Not to punish, but to make room for more life. That's hard. That's holy.

We all experience pruning. Here in Zambia, pruning might look like a cherished project being delayed by funding shortages. A promising path in life closed off by family responsibility. The heartbreak of illness, or the sting of division in our communities—tribalism, inequality, or the toxic suspicion that sometimes poisons our politics. Even within our Church, pruning happens: old ways must give way to the Spirit's new movement.

God's pruning hurts. Let's not pretend otherwise. But it's not the cut of condemnation—it's the care of a gardener. It's the loving hands of the Father shaping us into something more fruitful, more free. Pruning refines our discipleship. It forces us to let go of what we thought we needed—so that Christ can give us what we truly need.

And abiding—remaining—in the vine means more than praying once a day or going to Mass on Sunday. It means staying close to Christ when it would be easier to give up. It means clinging to him in the quiet of prayer, yes, but also in the sweat of service, in the daily act of forgiving someone who hurt you, in standing with the poor when it costs your comfort. Abiding in Christ means learning to love the people God has placed around you—especially when they are difficult to love.

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This connection is not only vertical—our relationship with God deepens our relationships with one another. The vine is not a solo plant. The branches intertwine. Your life in Christ affects mine, and mine affects yours. When one branch thrives, the whole vine rejoices; when one branch suffers, we all feel the loss.

That's why our divisions wound the Body of Christ. Not just globally—though we should pray for peace in Congo, Sudan, Ukraine, Palestine—but right here in Zambia. When tribal identity becomes more important than Gospel unity, we grieve the vine. When young people feel left out of parish life, when the unemployed feel invisible, when women are silenced, when corruption eats away at our trust in leadership—we are being called to prune, to heal, to reconnect.

The martyrs we remember today, St. Christopher Magallanes and his companions, lived this out. They remained in the vine even when it cost them their lives. Their courage was not the fruit of willpower alone—it grew from their connection to Christ, their daily abiding in him. In our context, martyrdom may not come by the sword, but it may come in quieter forms: resisting corruption, speaking the truth in love, forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it, standing with the marginalized when no one else will.

So what does all this mean for us?

It means that even when life feels uncertain—when we're being pruned, when the way forward is unclear—we are not alone. Christ is the vine. We are the branches. Stay close to him, and we will live.

Let me offer three questions for reflection:

- Where in your life is God pruning you right now? Is it in your plans, your pride, your attachments?
- How are you being called to abide more deeply in Christ—through prayer, service, or sacrifice?
- Where can you bear fruit in our community? Is it in building bridges across tribal lines? In mentoring a young person? In being a quiet, faithful witness in your family?

Let us not fear the shears of the vine grower. Let us trust the hands that prune us for love.

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Let us be a Church that abides in Christ—not just on Sundays, but in the fields and classrooms, the marketplaces and bus stops, the homes and hearts of our people.

Let us bear fruit that will last.

Prayerful Conclusion:

> Lord Jesus, true vine and source of our life, help us to remain in you. When we are pruned, give us courage. When we feel cut back, give us hope. Teach us to love as you love, to welcome as you welcome, to build as you build. May your grace flow through us and into the world you died to save. Amen.

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.