

Fifth Sunday of Easter

First Reading: Acts 9:26-31
Psalm: 22: I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.
Second Reading: 1 John 3:18-24
Gospel: John 15:1-8

Sharing Jesus Christ. Usually when I go on vacation, things remain quiet. This time, a strong earthquake struck near Kathmandu, in a country where I was visiting, tragically causing deaths, injuries and losses that made the international news.

Life happens – at times, in accord with plans that we have made and sometimes, completely ignoring the plans that we have made. And today, the Sunday readings invite us to reflect deeper into our Christian reality and to ask the question, “*Who am I as a Christian as life unfolds whether in accord to plans that I have made or, perhaps, not?*”

Discovering Jesus Christ. As a Christian, I am a man (or a woman) who, first and foremost, acknowledges Jesus. A Christian is open to others, and not closed to oneself or not self-referential. A Christian has the humility to say, “*It really is not just about me. It is about others, too.*” For us, Christians, of course, the true recognition of others always begins with the true recognition of God, and we come to know God by our encounter with His Son, Jesus. In the language of the Gospel, we recognize that we are branches but always in relation to Jesus who is the vine.

Pope Francis, during his audience with the different Charismatic Movements, shared his observation that, during such gatherings, people often chanted his name, “*Francesco! Francesco! Francesco!*” The Pope made a clear point and said, “*From now on, no more Francesco. Only, ‘Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!’*”

During my vacation, I prayed the rosary as we began our hike on the trail. When my guide and my porter saw my rosary, they thought I was a Buddhist praying with beads. So I told them that I am a Christian, a Catholic priest. And I have learned, from the elicited conversation through the rosary, that my guide was Hindu (albeit non-practicing)

and my porter was Buddhist (who did not specify the state of his involvement). My hope is that as they have learned that I am a Christian they too have seen in me how I actively seek to acknowledge the presence of God in my life and how the presence of God is of utmost importance in my own life.

Second, after recognizing Jesus, I accept that he offers me something important – a new identity in him. I am a branch and as a branch I am connected to Jesus the vine. It is not that Jesus is there and I am here. No! I am in Jesus Christ.

In the first reading, we encounter the figure of Saul. His encounter with Jesus is so radically transformative that he became Paul [Change in name is a change of identity!], and that he who once persecuted and put to death Christians, now championed the Gospel of Jesus and he himself was willing to be put to death for his faith in Jesus.

For me, this radical transformation of identity in Jesus has been concretely experienced in the show of concern and in the offering of prayers for me, for fellow trekkers and for the people of Nepal by parishioners from Blessed Trinity and other parishes where I have been, by brother priests in my support group, by friends from the Charismatic movements like Life in the Spirit and Cursillo, and from those involved in the Catholic men's and women's conferences. Such concern and prayers made experienced in a real way that I am not just a Christian by myself, rather I have a new identity and I belong to a greater reality, I am a member of the Body of Christ, His Church.

Third, my new found identity in Jesus enables me as a Christian to be pruned so as to bear good fruit. To be a Christian by name only is not enough. To be a Christian is to consciously give witness to a new life in Christ, by foregoing old, sterile and bad habits so as to acquire new, fruitful and good habits.

During my vacation, by observation, I have learned guides were allowed to sleep in the lodges, in the same quarter with their fellow guides. Porters, being treated as “lower class,” had to eat and to sleep outside the lodges, probably in less favorable condition. As Catholics, we are blessed with our experience of communion where we eat and drink the same Body and Blood of Jesus – where no one is treated special but rather

each one is made special. My hope is that as I shared my meals and even my room (when space became premium after the earthquake) with my guide and my porter, these gave them some experience of communion, where people are not valued for what they have or do not have but rather every one is valued simply because they are children of God.

Following Jesus Christ. Today, the Gospel reading situates us at a time when Jesus was preparing his disciples for his return to the Father. Jesus reminds us that disciples would live in a different reality when he would not anymore be physically present with them. Yet whether Jesus is physically present or not, each disciple is called to faithfully remain in Christ as a branch remains intimately connected to the vine.

During my vacation, I lived in a different world and reality and the challenge was how do I live as a Christian in this different world and reality. You, too, when you leave this sacred space, you enter a different reality, where others do not believe or believe differently. Yet the challenge is the same: how do you live as Christians in a life that continues to unfold, at times, as planned and, sometimes, not as planned?

Clearly, we cannot be distracted by how life turns out. Our focus must remain in Christ – in the recognition of the presence of Jesus in our lives, how he gives us new identity and how this new identity seeks to radically transform us so that we do only what is new, fruitful and good.

For us, Christians, the Gospel of Jesus Christ must shake our very being, like a strong earthquake, in order to test in each of us what, in the end, can truly stand before God, meaning, what can truly stand not just for today but for ever.