

Gospel: John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,
and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.

Remain in me, as I remain in you.

Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own
unless it remains on the vine,

so neither can you unless you remain in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit,
because without me you can do nothing.

Anyone who does not remain in me
will be thrown out like a branch and wither;
people will gather them and throw them into a fire
and they will be burned.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you,
ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.

By this is my Father glorified,
that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Homily Transcript - *Affirming the Divinity of Christ*

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Athanasius, Bishop and Doctor of the Church. Athanasius was born in the year 295 in Alexandria Egypt and he served as Secretary to Bishop Alexander during the Council of Nicaea. It was in that Council that the divinity of Christ was proclaimed. It's in the Council of Nicaea that we have the Nicene Creed that is often recited on Sundays.

Athanasius succeeded Bishop Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt and was involved in defending the proclamations of the Council of Nicaea; especially against the Aryans who denied the divinity of Christ. Unfortunately, the Roman Empire sided with the Aryans and so Athanasius experienced tremendous persecution during his lifetime. I'm surprised, as I talk to so many young adults today, that the divinity of Christ is actively debated. In fact, there are many young people today—but older people as well—that would look at Jesus and see him as an admirable figure: a great healer; a wise teacher; but Christ? No.

The controversies that surrounded Athanasius, surround Jesus today. Many contemporary theologians, in an effort to make Christianity more palatable to other world religions, would deny the divinity of Christ as well. There are even some religious that would deny the divinity of Jesus. They would see him as a good and holy man or see him as the son of God in the context that all of us are sons and daughters of God. They would say Jesus is the first and the holiest, but

we also share in the divinity of God as Jesus did. That was actively debated at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 in the fourth century; it's actively debated today.

CS Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*—which was first delivered as a series of lectures—argued that you really can't take a middle ground on the divinity of Jesus, because Jesus was executed for his claims to divinity. That's part of the reason why the Jewish authorities hated him and wanted him killed because they saw his comments as blasphemous. Clearly he was claiming a unique relationship with God. Of course you know that they couldn't execute a man by themselves so they needed the collusion of the Roman government to be able to put them to death. The charge that was brought against him by the high priest is that he was committing blasphemy—that he was claiming this unique relationship with God.

CS Lewis argues that there are a very limited number of possibilities here. Either Jesus was a madman (he was out of his mind)—and if you go to mental institutions today you'll meet many people who claim to be God or claim to be the son of God or who claim to be a reincarnation of Jesus. Mental institutions are filled with people who have that delusion. That's one possibility: Jesus was delusional or he was mentally insane. Another possibility, says Lewis, is that he was a liar. He was gifted with tremendous healing power, he was a great preacher, but ultimately he was a liar. He was the ultimate fake news; claiming something that wasn't true about himself.

Those are the two possibilities that CS Lewis lays out: either he's deluded or he's a liar. The third possibility is that he was who he says he was; he is who he says he is. There are limited possibilities—three choices, you choose. The fourth choice, which is the one that's preferred by the Aryans of the fourth century—and by many people today—is that he was a good man, he was a holy man like Gandhi was a holy man; like Buddha was a holy man; like Mohammed was a holy man; many examples of holy men and holy women, some of whom had miraculous powers, many of which had great wisdom. Jesus was just like that and we Christians are followers of Jesus because we admire his teachings, much as a Confucianist would admire the teachings of Confucius.

As CS Lewis argues, that simply doesn't hold up. It doesn't square with the Gospels. It doesn't square with the fact that for the first 300 years people were willing to lay down their life as believers in Jesus as the son of God—the only begotten son of God. They weren't laying down their lives because they believed he was a holy man, they were laying down their lives because in the words of today's gospel, they believed he is the vine, we are the branches and our call is to remain close to him.

Now one might argue, what difference does it make? Is it simply an abstract theological truth: Jesus is God vs. Jesus is a holy man. Come on! Let's not quibble over words. It makes a tremendous difference in terms of how we pray. Do we pray in Jesus and through Jesus to the Father or do we simply hold him up as another example? The Church is filled with 2,000 years of holy people, but those holy people that the Church holds up never claimed to be God. They claimed to come to God through Jesus; through his strength abiding within them.

When we gather to hear these words that have been passed down to us for 2,000 years from generation to generation; when we break the bread; when we hold the cup; when we partake in this Holy Communion; we believe that his spirit comes into us, that he transforms us and that we

share in his life and that through that faith we become his body, we become his visible face on this earth. He abides in us. In the words of John the Baptist, "he must grow more, I must grow less."

Athanasius spent his life proclaiming that truth and suffered much persecution as a result of it. Today we enjoy unparalleled freedom of religion. Let's pray that we never take that for granted and we embrace what we hold to be true: that Jesus is the only begotten son of God; that he means what he says in today's gospel. He is the vine and we pray that we as branches are never separated from him. Amen? Amen.