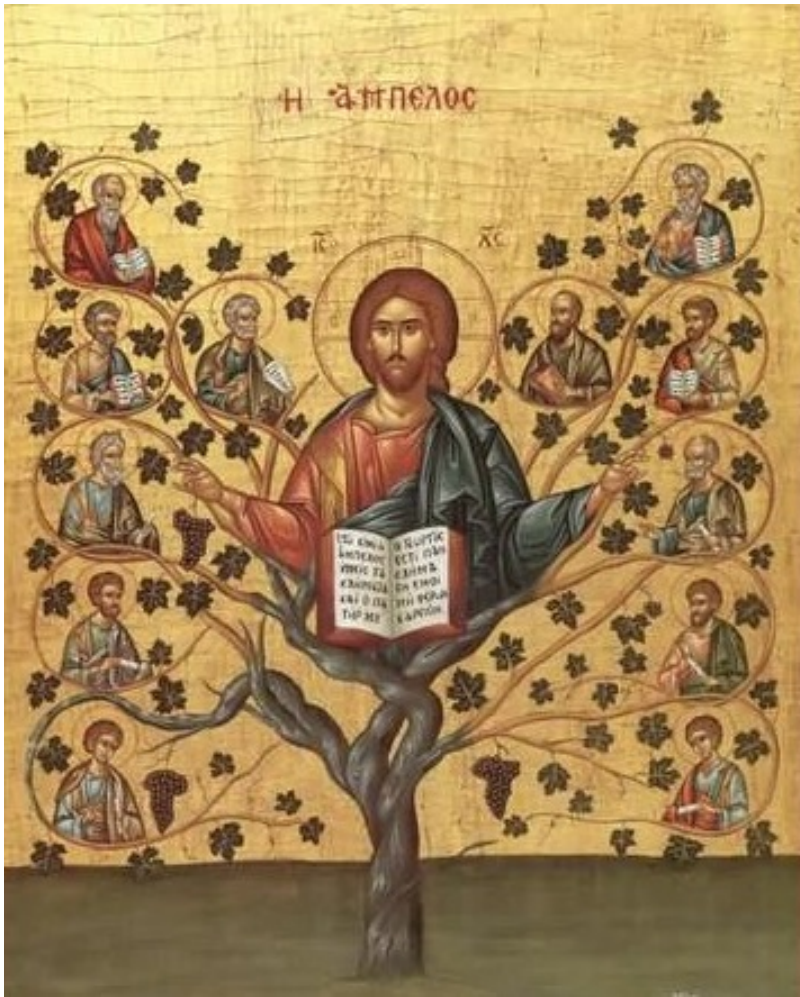


Commentary to the Fifth Sunday of Easter (B)



Michelangelo enters his studio. He examined the canvases of his pupils. A few he complimented. He advised some to keep their day jobs. Finally he came to his star disciple. The man was working on a small canvas. Michelangelo took up a brush. Across the picture, he wrote the Latin word "amplius." It means "larger." The maestro felt his pupil was playing it safe. He was not working up to capacity. He wanted him to start all over again. The artist did and he painted an exquisite canvas. Psychiatrists argue we leave this world with large portions of our brains woefully undeveloped.

But there is no argument that this is entirely true of our spirits. Spiritually we are capable of being more interesting Christians than we are. What we lack is boldness. Had we chutzpa, we could become spiritual masterpieces. Jesus must often be tempted to write the word "amplius" over the lives of so many. We are good as far as we have gone. But we have not gone far enough. Our spiritual canvases are too small. We are capable of so much more in the spiritual life. The lives of our spirits need constant repainting. The Teacher would tell us the larger canvases and brushes that we need are sitting on the benches before us. They are ours for the taking. "The greatest tragedy," wrote Leon Bloy, "is that each of us is not a saint." Is there anyone who thinks Christ would disagree with that judgment? Saints, we are told, make Jesus real.

The same Christ who in today's Gospel says, "...every branch that does bear fruit He prunes to make it bear even more." Our limited vision, says Christ, needs constant updating. But He does not tell us to grow fruit. In five verses, He tells us eight times to abide in Him. That's the secret. A saint said, 'Aim for the stars and you at least reach the mountain. But aim only for the mountain and you never get out of the mud.' The goals of many of us are too limited. We remain spiritual pygmies. Jesus tells us, "Launch out into the deep." Too often we attempt to go it alone in the spiritual life. This is not brightness personified. Take the geese for openers. Check them in flight. You will notice they fly in splendid formation. Centuries ago they learned the hard way that they could fly more easily and at greater distances as a group. We would do much better at our faith if we acted in concert with other believers. Think of the use of spiritual directors, reading of the spiritual masters, retreats, days of recollection, etc. A second trick that the clever geese have to teach us is about leadership.

When the leader of the famous "V" formation gets tired from fighting the strong headwinds, he or she drops back for a breather. Immediately, another goose comes forward to lead the pack. How much more effective our parish and we as Catholics would be if everyone carried his or her share of the burdens. As the geese would be the first to tell us, the age-old cry "Let George do it!" is not good enough. There are some of you reading these lines who have great contributions in leadership to offer the Nazarene. You must come forward and take risks. Christ needs you and wants you. Hey, so do we. But the geese have more to teach us. They encourage and support each other. When they fly in their formations, they honk away. This is especially true if they fly through storms. The honking keeps the group in tight formation and serves as a beacon for strays. Would that we might learn to support and encourage one another - but especially our strays. Mark Twain reminds us encouragement is oxygen for the soul. He said he could live for a month on one good compliment. We all believe in booster shots to protect us against physical diseases. Why then do we not indulge in booster words?

They are the compliments that will pick up the spirits of others. We need one another's help. The Christian life, said one master, isn't hard to live. It's impossible. Only one person has pulled it off - Jesus. But He has sent the Holy Spirit to help us. The master reminds us the Holy Spirit can make a great finish out of a slow start. He can make us run well even in mud. Some misguided strays say, "I'd be a hypocrite if I started going to church again." To them Fulton Sheen said, "Come back. There's always room for one more."

Fr James Gilhooley