

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR B

Second Reading 1 John 3: 18–24

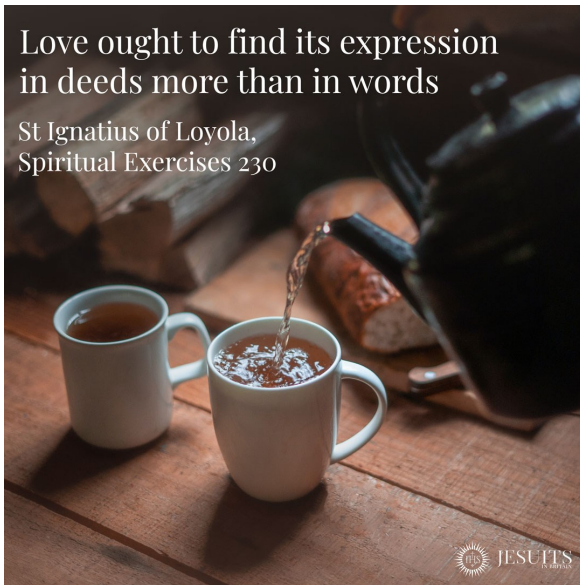
The author of this Epistle is addressing a community trying to live by St John's Gospel. Unlike the letters of St Paul, which were written down earlier than the synoptic gospels themselves, it would seem that this letter—or more likely the text of this address to the Johannine community—was written down later than St John's Gospel itself.

Theologians have come to this conclusion by noticing the use of St John's main themes, for example: *'His commandments are these: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we love one another as he told us to'*. Believing in Jesus and loving others are inseparable actions, two sides of the same coin. St John's audience already has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is possible to see parallels between this text and today's Gospel reading. Just as branches depend on the trunk of the plant for life, so we depend on Christ: *'I am the vine, you are the branches'*. It is this relationship which helps us even when we doubt ourselves: *'God is greater than our conscience and he knows everything'*.

Love ought to find its expression
in deeds more than in words

St Ignatius of Loyola,
Spiritual Exercises 230



At the core of this text is the notion that love is not merely paying lip service, but is action-oriented. As the saying goes, 'Actions speak louder than words'; or as St Ignatius Loyola puts it: *'Love is shown in deeds, not just in words'*.

Gospel John 15: 1–8

Chapter 15 of John's Gospel is part of 'The farewell discourses' (Ch 14–16), and takes place just after the Last Supper. Jesus is reassuring his disciples as he prepares them to live without his physical presence. The chapter can be divided into three parts:

- * Vv. 1–8 (today's reading): The relationship of the believer to Christ, with its central commandment: 'Remain in me'.
- * Vv. 9–17 (next week's reading): The relationship of believers with one another. Its central commandment is 'Love one another as I have loved you'.
- * Vv. 18–27: The relationship of believers to the hostile world.

'I am the true vine'

Another of the 'I am' sayings of Jesus. Every time he uses them we discover another aspect of who he is. The Jews were familiar with the Old Testament idea of the vineyard as representing the people of Israel (e.g. Isaiah 5: 1–7; Jeremiah 2: 21; Ezekiel 15). They also knew much about vine growing, which required constant care and was very labour intensive. It was an important export for their economy. God the Father is the vine dresser, but what is new here is that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches.

Jesus is the *true* vine in contrast to some 'false' vines, to which we ourselves might be attached: a job, a hobby, a team etc.

Bearing much fruit

The fruit to be borne is not specified. In the context of the surrounding chapters of the Gospel, we see that the fruit is love, joy and compassion, but each one of us can decide which fruit is needed in our own lives.

For a disciple, *bearing fruit*, which carries the seeds enabling the plant to reproduce, can mean making more disciples. John is writing for a Christian community and is encouraging them to grow in numbers.

Pruning the branches

The Greek word translated here by *pruning* can also mean to cleanse, to purify. As *every* branch will be pruned, all of us can expect to experience this cleansing.

'Remain in me'

This phrase appears eight times in these few verses. It is the crux of Jesus's message. We cannot do anything on our own. It has often been translated as 'abide with me' or 'live in me'.