

ROOTED IN CHRIST FOR FRUITFULNESS

One of the major headaches of African parents in Africa is the issue of having a male child; in fact, every African parent is obsessed with it. For them, having male children ensures their lineage continues long after they have left the world. Although there are lots of priests in Africa for many reasons that I cannot delve into presently, that fact remains that so many young men are discouraged from becoming priest due to the fact there would not be anyone to continue their lineages when they are gone. However biological connection is not the only way to bear fruit and to prolong one's lineage; the most fundamental way of doing that is spiritual connection, and I will tell you why.

The priest that inspired me to the priesthood is Mgr Ralph Nwosu who was my parish priest when I was a young altar server. Mgr Ralph Nwosu was not just a priest but a true man of God. He was the defender of the defenceless, a seasoned pastor, a peacemaker, a true champion of charity and a profoundly holy man. Before his death in 2017, I paid him a visit to catch up with him. When I got to his residence, he was surrounded by several priests, and lay faithful who were there to spend time with him. In fact, so many of them had been by his side for several weeks, attending to his needs and making sure he was comfortable. At one point during our conversation, a priest asked him to mention the various fruits he would be presenting to God when he meets God face-to-face. Mgr Ralph smiled, asked us to look around all those in the room at the time, while pointing to all of us he said – **Everyone here is the fruit of my priestly ministry and I cannot wait to stand before God and present all of you to Him.** Initially, some people were confused at what he said, then he added – **I am proud to be surrounded by so many people whom the Lord has given me throughout my priestly ministry; not so many married people could boast of this number of people by their side. This is why I am serene in the face of death because I know God will be merciful to me; I have fought a good fight and all of you are the fruits of my labour.** At the end of the above statement, everyone in room was crying; it dawned on us that all of us were there due to the priestly ministry of a priest who was very loyal and obedient to God and to the Church. When I travelled to Nigeria in 2022, one of the places I visited was the tomb of Mgr Ralph Nwosu, wherein I spent several minutes in thanksgiving to God for the life and ministry of Mgr Ralph who inspired me to become the type of priest I am today. It is this same rootedness in Christ which leads to fruitfulness that we are presented with in today's Sunday readings.

In today's First Reading from Acts Chapter 9, we are presented with the fruitfulness of Saul (Paul) which emerged from his rootedness in Christ. Yes, Saul's fruitfulness from his being rooted in Christ became manifest in his personal life by his preaching fearlessly and boldly about Christ in Damascus and in Jerusalem, to the point of risking his life by preaching to the Hellenists. Secondly, Saul's fruitfulness was equally felt within the early Christian communities since the churches in Judea, Galilee and Samaria were at peace since their one-time persecutor had become a member and an apostle of the Gospel.

The above fruitfulness of Saul was only down to his been rooted in Christ as we hear in today's Gospel Reading from John Chapter 15. Christ made it clear that He is the Vine, and we are the branches. In this statement – *Ego Eimi he Ampelos; hymeis ta klemata* (I am the vine; you are the branches), Christ was making an emphatic statement that is relatable to all. He is the person who gives life and fruitfulness to us; without Him, there will not be any life and/or fruitfulness associated with us. This is equally an image that everyone of us has access to since all of us are familiar with the cycle of life. For any branch of any tree to bear fruit, that branch must be firmly attached to that tree from which all the nutrients emanate and which the branch needs. Once the branch is cut off from that tree, it withers and dies. The same thing applies to our relationship with God. If we remain drafted onto him (*meno*), then all the sustenance we need will be provided to us, leading to our bearing plenty fruits. Our fruitfulness from being rooted in Chris will be showcased in our love which would not be mere talks but something real and active as St John tells us in today's Second Reading. Yes, the one prerequisite for being branches grafted onto Christ is that we bear fruits; that is why any branch that does not bear fruit is cut away. However, we are not called to bear any kind of fruit; it is by bearing the fruit of love which is aimed at all around us that we can claim to have been true branches rooted on Christ, the Vine.

My friends, what fruits have we borne for Christ? If we should stand before God today, what are those fruits we would be presenting to Him that we have borne from being grafted onto Him all our lives? The inescapable fact is that all Christians are called to bear fruit; however, for us to bear fruits of love and not hatred, we need to die to ourselves first so that Christ will supply us with the right nutrients we need. We need to die to Ego Drama, Selfishness, Egocentrism, and Self Adulation. It is when we have died to self, that we can then bear fruits of love which is seen in Theo Drama, Charity, Altruism, Selflessness, and Humancentric. As Maya Angelou reminds us: **“People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.”** May the feelings we elicit and convey to everyone we meet, be that of true love, mercy, and compassion.

Like Mgr Ralph who spent himself in caring for others and was serene in the face of death because he had borne enough fruits; may we resolve today to bear good fruits which we would not only present to God at the end of our lives, but which will still resonate here on earth long after we are gone. In following the footsteps of Mgr Ralph, I hope one day, I will look around the many good fruits I will bear for God and be eager to stand before Him to present those fruits for His delight. **So, help me God!**

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter, Year B (28/04/2024)