

REFLECTION FOR 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER

I knew a Rev Brother who died some years ago. He was called Rev Brother John.

He had created an amazing ministry in prisons, and he worked with those recently released from jail.

One Saturday, Rev Brother John hosted a program for at-risk young people and their families. By the end of the day, one mom was telling everyone how Brother John's teaching had made a powerful impact on her son.

She asked, "How did Brother John learn how to connect with criminals?"

One of the Rev Brothers answered, "Maybe it's because he spent 20 years in prison. Brother John murdered his wife."

Brother John spent much of his youth in reform schools, and he married at the age of 19. In a drunken rage he shot his wife in their kitchen.

In prison, Brother John met a priest whose preaching changed his life. Over a 20year period, Brother John experienced a conversion that changed everything about him. After being released, he joined a Religious Order and became a Rev Brother and he ministered to prisoners and at-risk young people for the rest of his life.

That grateful mother was not sure how to react to this story. She had been rejoicing that Brother John had helped her son. Now she struggled to figure out how this man with a violent past could be the instrument of God's grace.

The early Christians were having a similar struggle as we heard in our first reading. Someone with a violent past was claiming to be an instrument of God's grace.

Saul – who is later known as SAINT PAUL – was a faithful Jewish man. He loved his tradition. And when fishermen like Peter, James and John came along, claiming that Jesus was risen, Paul understood how dangerous their message was.

Paul knew that God wanted him to suppress the Christians. When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death, Paul was there, applauding the violence.

Paul was given authority to search homes. He grabbed Christians and dragged them to prison.

How many Christians died because of Paul?

Then, one day, as Paul heads out to arrest more Christians, he encounters the Risen Lord. He comes to understand that this Jesus really is risen, he really is the saviour!

Through this conversion, the Paul who had been persecuting Christians, starts preaching in the name of Jesus.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him.

Some Christians struggled with that. How could someone with such a violent past now become an instrument of God's grace?

This struggle raises a fundamental question – do we really believe that Christ can radically change lives? Do we really believe that the Risen Lord has the power to change sinners, and make them saints?

Christian history is full of stories about people whose lives had spiralled out of control. Then God takes hold of them. God heals their hearts and sets them on a new path.

That sounds great when the sinner is named 'Saul,' and he lived 20 centuries ago. But what happens when the sinner is named Brother John, who killed his wife in their kitchen... do we trust his conversion?

We might be sceptical about these conversion stories because we know how hard it is to change ourselves. How often have you said to yourself, "I need to change," and you try and then you can't? We try to change our lives, and we see how hard it is.

I've been trying to change my eating patterns and exercise more to reduce my big stomach. I know how hard change is!

Some of us have tried to change our spending habits, our drinking habits, our exercise habits.

Some of us try to change our attitudes – I want to stop being angry, I want to stop being selfish, I want to stop holding old grudges. I want to forgive. We try to change. And we see it is too hard.

Some of us try to change our behaviours – I want to be more generous, I want to share my time and talent with others. I want to be more patient and gentle with my family. We try. Change is very hard.

Sometimes we do manage to make changes in our lives. But most of us have a litany of examples where we've tried to change, and we just can't.

Perhaps that's why people were frightened by a guy like Saul, who claimed to have changed. Or a guy like Brother John, who claims to have changed.

Knowing how hard change is, we keep asking: Can such change really happen in someone? And if such change can happen in them, can it happen in me?

What I know is this: if we keep thinking about all the ways we have failed to change our lives, we might dismiss people's life story of God's life-changing love.

Yes, GOD'S life changing love.

Maybe THAT's the key!

Did you notice? In all of those examples I used a moment ago, I kept talking about the ways I have attempted to change my life. The ways people tried to change their lives. I try. I failed.

That's the problem. **We** think **we** can do it. I think I have the strength to change me and change my world.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. You cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. For cut off from me you can do nothing."

Without Christ, we can't do anything good. With Christ, our life changes. Not because we are suddenly stronger, but because Christ is alive in us! His strength starts to do things in us that we could never dream of.

Saint Paul did not wake up and say, "I think I will change my life today!" Paul didn't change his life – Christ did! When Christ is alive in us, HE does things that we can't do on our own.

Christ is still in the business of changing lives. But we doubt that, because we've been trying to make changes in our lives and our world, by our own strength. That doesn't work.

The invitation from Jesus is clear - Remain in me. Abide in me, Pray to me. Listen to my word, abide in me and your life will bear fruit of kindness, mercy, charity, holiness and love.

Understand that, as a Christian, Christ is already alive in you. You can't change your life on your own – Christ will. You don't have to change things in isolation – you are one branch on the vine. Your brothers and sisters are here to help and inspire you, to share your burden through the Holy Spirit.

You are not defined by your past failures – you are set free by God's love in the present and God's plan for your future.

Our world is not doomed to an endless cycle of tragedy. One person at a time, one branch at a time, God is giving us a new beginning in a new creation.

God took hold of Saul and made him a saint Paul. God took hold of B. John and made him a preacher. That God has not retired! He's right here, in word, sacrament, in our faith community and Spirit. Are you ready for some change?

Fr Patrick