

*The Ascension of the Lord (English)*  
*Sunday After Ascension (Latin)*  
*May 17, 2026*  
*Year of the Church in History*

*“He showed me a [great] willow, overshadowing plains and mountains, and under the shadow of the willow all have come who are called by the name of the Lord.” (The Shepherd of Hermas)*

We are almost finished with our reflections on the ancient Christian text, *The Shepherd of Hermas*. On this second to the last reflection, I would like to ponder an image Hermas was given in a parable to explain the reality of our situation in this life as Christians. The image, mentioned in the above quote, is that of a great willow tree which casts its shadow upon the land.

*“‘Listen,’ saith he; ‘this great tree which overshadows plains and mountains and all the earth is the law of God which was given to the whole world; and this law is the Son of God preached unto the ends of the earth. But the people that are under the shadow are they that have heard the preaching, and believed on Him; but the great and glorious angel is Michael, who hath the power over this people and is their captain.’” (Fourth Mandate, The Shepherd of Hermas)*

To begin to understand the parable of the great willow tree, we need to quickly retrace our steps. Hermas is presented with the image of the Word of God (Jesus) as a willow tree. This tree is so very large that its shadow can cover the whole land. Men and women go to the tree and a part of the tree, branch or twig, is taken from the tree and presented to them. Some of the “rods” (the word used for the sticks of wood taken from the willow tree) are of various sizes and possess varied features. Some are bare, some display imperfections, some have leaves and some have the beginnings of small fruit. These rods/sticks (I will use the word “sticks” instead) are brought to an area and planted. They are watered and nurtured to see which will grow and bear fruit.

We can ask ourselves, at this junction: “What is the message conveyed to Hermas through the parable of the willow tree?” Although I cannot claim to understand the parable fully, let me attempt to offer a thought for us all.

Through the grace of God, you and I find ourselves in the shade of this great willow tree. This moment came, for each of us, on the day we were baptized in the Trinitarian formula we are all familiar with. On that day, we were presented a stick from the tree. This stick was planted in the fertile soil present in our soul. As we have sought to remain united to God, our soil has been watered and fertilized. This has caused the stick to take root and grow. Ideally, as we have gotten older, our tree should be large. It should be a continuation of the great willow providing its shade to cool the heat of the afternoon sun (the world).

As much as I would like this to be possible for all men and women, I realize this parable offers another aspect which must also be examined. As our trees grow, we may find they produce, not cooling shade nor delightful fruit, rather they produce thorns, thistles and rotten fruit. The reasons for this reality can be many. One of the first things we need consider is not

the shape of the stick, its size or its imperfections, rather, we need to examine the soil in which it is planted. God places each stick in the soil we provide as our baptism. A child may present a rich fertile soil. An adult, the soil may contain rocks or sand accumulated through life's experiences. Into whatever soil the stick has been placed, the soil must be maintained. We need frequent watering and fertilizing if our soil is to maintain its best traits. Secondly, we know there are present, on fruit bearing trees, those branches which produce no fruit. Rather, they steal the nutrients needed by the more fruitful branches. I have heard these referred to as "suckers" since they suck the life of productivity from the tree. As a person must clip these suckers from the tree, so must we remove those things which suck the spiritual life out of us. These may be the branches of anger, lust, self-indulgence or unforgiveness. These suckers will develop in every tree and must be dealt with quickly so our spiritual lives may blossom. Lastly, no matter how big or how old the tree may become, it will still need care. A tree, once matured, can still suffer due to disease, drought and lack of nourishment.

The parable of the willow speaks to us all when we think of those we love. I know you who are parents want to provide the shade and protection your children and grandchildren need. You have done so many, many times throughout their lives. You have taught them simple things such as looking both ways before crossing streets. You have taught them more difficult things. To judge situations and individuals so as to not place themselves in danger. You have tried to protect them from every destructive situation, thing or person you could ever imagine. You have done this because you love them. Yet, I ask myself, as well as you, if the extent of our protection was governed by the use of a tree, truly how large would that cooling shade be? Could those we love reside under the shade of our virtuous lives? Or, have we worked and bled only to offer them everything they would want in this world, but little of the spiritual shade which deflects the day's heat? I do not believe we may answer this question fully during our lifetimes. Sadly, it will only be when we are gone when our good deeds, or ill, will be revealed to the extent they either shaded or did not shade our loved ones. Before the Divine Reaper wields His sickle to prune us at last, let us take the time each day to prayerfully reflect upon ourselves and begin the process of nurturing our soil (soul) and pruning those things which suck the grace out of our spiritual lives. We all want our trees to provide shade, but for the tree to provide this, sweat, blood, tears and dirty hands must be willingly sought and accepted.