

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year, 2009

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Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Today is the fifth Sunday in our season of Lent. The end of Lent is in sight. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, more properly called the Sunday of the Passion, and with the Sunday of the Passion we enter that final week of Lent called Holy Week, the week that studies the Passion of our Lord. Holy Week will lead us on a voyage of faith that takes us through suffering and death to victory – the victory of the empty tomb, the victory of Resurrection - the victory of Easter. I hope that there is no need to remind you that there cannot be Easter without Good Friday, there cannot be resurrection without death - for Jesus or any of us. There cannot be the joy of life without the passion of life. This Sunday’s gospel and the days of this current week set the stage for us as we as we prepare for Holy Week – the week of our Lord’s suffering and death.

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What is passionate about suffering? The word “passion” has, as its root, the Latin verb, “to suffer,” and as the Bible uses the word, it means “suffer,” specifically, our Lord’s suffering. But in typical English usage, the word suggests especially strong emotions of love, or hate or almost any feeling. It is the intensity that makes it, if you will, “passionate.” Clearly, our Lord was “passionate” about his suffering. The Bible tells us that his emotions were so strong on the night before his crucifixion that he literally sweated blood , as he prayed to his Father, asking that, if it God agreed, then “let this cup pass,”.

I think that when we reflect on it, most of us are passionate about our Lord’s suffering, too. We cannot help but be strongly moved when we consider about how much he loves us to have endured the Cross for you and for me. Jesus said that there is no greater love than when you give your life for your friends. We are the friends of Jesus, make no mistake about this. Jesus loves us so much that he died so that you and I might have eternal life. But notice that I said we “might have eternal life,” I did not say unconditionally that we will. Salvation is not a given, and to suggest so is simply heresy. We have to choose a participatory role in the Passion of Jesus, remembering that we are baptized into the death of Jesus as well as into his Resurrection.

Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This applied to Jesus and it applies to us, too. Jesus followed these words by telling us that those who wish to be disciples must follow in his steps and, he said, if you want to save your life at the expense of discipleship, you will lose it, period!

This ought to grab our attention. There is a cost of discipleship, and that cost is participation in our Lord's suffering. This has been a constant theme of Lent, if we have taken notice. We have to die to self; we must share in the Cross of Good Friday if we are to share in the Resurrection of Easter. And we do this only when we come to the realization that by our common humanity we are one in Creation and we are one in the Lord.

We are neither better nor worst than our brothers and our sisters. Saint Paul said, in his Letter to the Galatians, that in Jesus, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female," for we are one in Christ. This is Saint Paul at his very best, but we have to consider, here, a passage of time, because twenty centuries have taken a toll on Paul's analogies and comparisons. We don't see the world in terms of Jews and Greeks and slaves and free men. It took us long enough, but we finally managed to realize that slavery was wrong and eliminated that distinction. To bring Saint Paul up to date, we have to understand that what Paul was saying, and what God intends, is that we cannot, in Christ, morally divide humanity based on things beyond human choice. We are one in our humanity and we are one in the Lord, and it is with this recognition that we begin to understand how we participate in our Lord's Passion and find our salvation. We share in the Passion by taking up the Cross of Jesus and following him, and we do this by crucifying our narcissism so that we can become Christ to our neighbor. And we are called to do all of this in a state of unconditional love, because this is how Jesus loves us.

This is what we mean when we talk of dying to self, and that process of dying to self, in the service of our neighbors, is what we mean by suffering. It puts all others on par with us and not below us, and not above us, and that concept, that understanding clearly goes against the norm. This is a tall order, but it is what Christianity is all about. And, it is the job of the Lenten season, and the job of the Church, to get us to that understanding and that point in life.

The greatest danger that we face is the danger of complacency about the Passion, because the Passion must involve us too - continuously, perpetually. We've heard the story so often that with one more telling, one more Good Friday, we are tempted to hear it and take it with a grain of salt. God forbid that we forget that we, too, must share in that Passion if we want the benefits of his Passion; if we want to bear much fruit in the name of our Lord. *Amen.*