

March 17 V Sunday of Lent

The readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent present us with a challenge: Just as Jesus became the “Promised Messiah of Glory” and the “Conquering Son of Man” by offering his life for others, we, too, will only come to Heaven by accepting and offering God the sufferings He permits, and by dying to ourselves, spending our lives in self-giving, sacrificial service. Today’s readings focus on the upcoming death of Jesus, which is interpreted not only as a priestly sacrifice (Heb. 5) but also as the moment of Christ’s “exaltation” and “glorification” (Jn. 12).

The first reading, taken from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, explains how God will replace the Old Covenant of Judgment with a New Covenant of Forgiveness of sins. This New or Renewed Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah has been fulfilled through Jesus’ life, death and Resurrection.

In the second reading, the author of the ‘Letter to the Hebrews’ tells that it is by Jesus’ suffering and death, in obedience to the Father’s will, that the New Covenant will be established. Quoting the full text of Jeremiah 31:31-34, he explains that the new and better covenant was inaugurated through the High Priest Jesus’ offering of himself as the one perfect sacrifice for sins. We cannot appreciate adequately the “Blood of the New and Eternal Covenant” which we share in the Eucharist without recognizing the joys and sufferings, triumphs, and setbacks that marked the history of God’s Covenant relationship with His people.

Using metaphors of the “sown wheat grain” and the “spent life” in today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches the lessons which are recapitulated in the ‘Letter to the Hebrews’. The Gospel hints at the inner struggle of Jesus in accepting the cup of suffering to inaugurate the New and Eternal Covenant. However, Jesus accepts the cross as his “hour,” meaning the stepping-stone to his passion, death, Resurrection, and exaltation. Jesus also considers his “hour” as the way of glorifying his Heavenly Father and of being glorified by his Father. In addition, it is the way by which all people will be drawn into the saving action of God. Finally, the “lifting up” of Jesus on the cross and later into Heavenly glory by Resurrection and Ascension is the assurance of our own exaltation and glorification, provided we accept our crosses.

Jesus explains to his apostles that it is by his suffering and death that he is bringing life and liberation to the sinful world, just as a grain of wheat sown in the field ceases to remain itself alone, “just a seed,” by germinating and then growing into a plant which

produces many new grains of wheat. In the same way, it is by the self-sacrificial lives of holy men and women that life and salvation come to mankind. In other words, when we 'die' to our selfishness, we 'rise' to new life in Jesus Christ. To be "buried in the earth" means avoiding sin, accepting suffering and living for others.

1) Today's Gospel teaches us that new life and eternal life are possible only by the death of the self through obedience, suffering, and service. Salt delivers its taste by dissolving in water; a candle gives light by having its wick burned and its wax melted. The oyster produces a priceless pearl by a long and painful process. Loving parents sacrifice themselves so that their children can enjoy a better life than they themselves have had. Let us pray for this self-sacrificial spirit, especially during Lent.

2) Only a life spent for others will be glorified here in this world and in Heaven. We know that the world owes everything to people who have spent their time and talents for God and for their fellow human beings. Mother Teresa, for instance, gave up her comfortable teaching career and, with just 5 rupees (17 cents) in her pocket, began her challenging life for the "poorest of the poor" in the crowded slums of Calcutta. Thus, she became, in the words of the Secretary General of the U.N., "the most powerful woman in the world." We see similar cases in the history of great saints, scientists, and benefactors of mankind in all walks of life. Also we hear these days a lot about St Frances Cabrini, in spite of her ill health travelled all the way from Italy to America and stepped into the world of chaos and poverty of the Italian immigrants of New York and worked for their wellbeing.

3) It is better to burn out than rust out. This is one of the repeated pieces of advice Jesus has given us. Bernard Shaw in his play, Joan of Arc, shows the saint as praying: "Lord I shall last a year; use me as you can." Many charitable foundations and research institutions are financed by generous millionaires who understood this great principle of life, while so many others selfishly keep their God-given wealth and talents for themselves. Let us learn to live this Lenten period "burning out," spending our time and talents for others around us by humble, selfless and self-giving service. In the words of John Wesley "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can".