

Homily for 5th Lenten Sunday

March 18, 2023

Intro: In John's gospel, Jesus has come to the end of his public ministry. Mary of Bethany has anointed him in anticipation of his burial, he has entered Jerusalem with great acclaim, and now, in his moment of triumph even the Greeks wish to see him. But Jesus knows that it is also the time of his defeat. It is the great meaning of today's gospel.

John 12:20-33: Our gospel makes four points:

First, the Greeks who want to see Jesus are Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora. We know they are Jews because they have come to Jerusalem for the Passover. Still, as Hellenistic Jews, they represent the non-Jewish world, come to see the miracle-working savior of the world. But Jesus' salvation for the whole world is different from what they expect.

Second, Jesus does not reveal himself to them; instead he speaks to his disciples, who themselves are caught up in the sense of triumph. He says his hour of glorification is indeed at hand, but not as they expect it. He must be the seed that falls into the ground and dies in order to produce great fruit. "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever disdains his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life."

Third, Jesus does not look forward to his torture and death. He is frightened. This is John's way of speaking of the agony in the garden where Jesus asks that the cup of his passion might pass him by. Is he supposed to ask to be saved from the hour of his death? No, his Father has sent him for this hour, and he prays that his Father in heaven might be glorified by his obedient death on the cross. The Father's voice from heaven assures Jesus (and especially the crowd which is listening) that God has been glorified by his life, and will be glorified by his death which leads to the glory of his risen life.

And that is the connection to the fourth point: The ruler of this world, the devil, will be driven out by Jesus's death. "When I am lifted up from the earth [on the cross], I will draw everyone to myself (and to salvation in Him)."

The Meaning for us:

We all do not necessarily want glory, but we do want success in this life. We want our life to be easy and filled with blessings. Jesus, on the other hand, expects that our life will be difficult: he says we must carry our own crosses if we want to attain to the glory of eternal life. It is a hard message, but it is the only realistic one.

We start each day with hope that all will go well, but usually there are failure, defeats.

Our child skins his knee. It is his cross.

The washing machine breaks and we do not have the money to repair it.

Our child refuses to see the wisdom of our prohibition of drugs.

The project I have worked on for months is passed over for or rejected.

Worse, for no fault of my own I am unemployed and cannot find work.

Problems with health: Our child has cystic fibrosis, my spouse has early onset pancreatic cancer, I suffer a stroke, and can no longer use my dominant right side. Even if I have good health and live to 83 years old, I find that my systems (digestive, respiratory, circulatory) are worn out and fail me. And in the midst of all this my health insurance won't cover my case, or is diminished by an uncaring government.

Worst of all, the God to whom I pray is not answering me; my prayer is filled with dryness or even doubt: is there Anyone there?

How do I respond to these reversals? Do I blame myself for not doing it right? Do I blame my unjust world, or even the God who is supposed to care for me? Or do I accept them as the cross that I now have to bear? Do I see that it is acceptance of the cross that drives out my demons which tempt me to riches, honor, glory--the greed which is starving our world? Do I shoulder my cross with the realization that Jesus is there with me, the one who is driving out the devils of my life and leading me to peace now and glory hereafter?

In my childhood home there was a crucifix in our dining room, a crucifix in my parents' bedroom, and in the bedrooms of my sister and me. Looking on that cross, we were constantly reminded of God's love for us, that "God so loved the world that he handed over his only Son... that we might have eternal life." Jesus lifted up on the cross drew us to himself. While his focused our minds on how petty were our crosses in comparison with his, we were reminded that Jesus has asked his disciples to take up their cross daily, to follow him.

Do you have crucifixes in your home? In places where you regularly can look up on them to draw near to Christ, the meaning of your life? And now, do you look forward to Holy Week, where we celebrate not only God's love for us, but his triumph over death which brings life to you, and to our world? Easter comes only after Good Friday, the resurrection only after the cross.

The Cross is the good news.