

5th Sunday of Lent – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (March 22, 2015)

With today's liturgy, we are drawing near the end of the Lenten season.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, after which begins Holy Week.

In today's gospel, Jesus speaks of his coming suffering and death. In language typical of the Gospel of John, he says that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." What "glorification" in this context might mean is suggested by the saying: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Today's second reading offers a striking religious and psychological interpretation of the agony of Jesus in the Garden. The focus is on his humanity. Death, especially a violent and painful death, a death, in addition, of a relatively young person, is enormously challenging. The author imagines Jesus offering up "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death." Perhaps the most surprising affirmation in the reading is the statement that follows. He was "heard," we are told, "because of his reverent submission." At first glance it is not clear what this could mean as he was not saved from the fate that threatened him. In what sense, then, was his prayer answered? It was answered, Hebrews suggests, in the sense that in his struggle to

continue on the path laid out for him, Jesus learned obedience; he learned to bring his will into total conformity with the mysterious will of God for him. Through his fidelity to the mission entrusted to him, a fidelity that took him to the cross, Jesus, we are told, was made perfect and became for all who through faith and obedience are united with him “the source of eternal salvation.”

Today’s gospel points to the same events. As Jesus reflects on what lies ahead for him, he admits that his “soul is troubled.” In spite of that, however, he has no intention of seeking to escape the suffering and death that await him. “It is for this reason,” he declares, “that I have come to this hour.”

In seeking an analogy from everyday life to explain what is soon to happen, Jesus appeals to a fact of nature: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

The image is evocative. No matter what we understand of the process involved, the saying points to a paradox of human life. It is in dying to ourselves, in dying to our fears and concerns, that we are able to come alive in new and life-giving ways. Every genuine act of love, every real reaching out to another, presupposes an overcoming of selfishness and self-centredness.

The great theme of death and life, of life in and through death, is not only central to nature and to human life in general, it is also a key to what Christianity is all about. What we call the Paschal Mystery involves both the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The two are inseparable. Had Jesus not been raised by God to the fullness of life, his death would have been but one more example of how the world crushes innocence and goodness. Without Easter we would have to number Jesus among the prophets and wisdom teachers rejected by those whom they sought to serve.

Had Jesus, on the other hand, somehow passed from this life to the next without the in-between step of his arrest and condemnation, his suffering and death, he would not have really shared our life and therefore not healed and renewed it from within. He would not have become the great consolation and encouragement to us in our suffering and in the face our death that he is.

The theme of death and resurrection permeates all aspects of Christian life. In baptism we are plunged for the first time into the mystery of Christ. In the early church when baptism was above all baptism of adults, people used to do go down into running water or a large font to be baptized by immersion. The symbolism was obvious. As the apostle Paul once put it, we who have been baptized into

Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death. We have gone down as it were into the tomb with him so that with him we might rise to newness of life.

This process of dying to self and rising to new life in Christ which begins at baptism is meant to continue throughout life. It takes place every time we say “no” to things like anger, jealousy, greed, or lust, and every time we say “yes” to forgiveness, compassion, generosity, or love. The process has not only a moral dimension but also a spiritual one. It involves prayer and the reading of Scripture, and, in a special way, participation in the eucharist.

In the great prayer of thanksgiving and praise at the heart of the Mass, we thank God for what he has done for us – for creation, for the gift of life and for salvation in Christ. In our recalling the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, he is rendered present among us in the very act of his self-giving love. This is my body, my person, given for you. In communion we open ourselves to the risen Christ and to the gift of his love.

May our celebrations this year during Holy Week and especially at the Easter Vigil be occasions for us to experience in a deeper way the life-giving, life-transforming power of the death and resurrection of Jesus.