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Fifth Sunday of Lent

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When I put my name down as preacher for today, I thought : “O BOY! 5th Sunday of Lent! Development and Peace.... Lazarus or the alledged adulterous woman! Great topics. Lazarus on how Jesus frees and liberates a man from death and from bonds that tie up the body. And the woman about to be stoned, on how Jesus shows extreme compassion and promotes the spirit over the letter of the Law and liberates her. But then I discovered that they were for the year A and C – last year and next year. This year is Sunday B. And what we get is ordinary people who want to see Jesus on one hand and a reflection from a heavenly voice glorifying Jesus on the other. So what’s in this Gospel of John for US? Let’s find out...

We’ll it’s clearly not about one of those things that Jesus DOES: a miracle, or stunning moment in his life. But it is about who Jesus IS. And don’t we all know by now what the answer is? In John alone, Jesus is the Word, the Way, the Life, the Son of Man, even Son of God. All great words and descriptions. But how much of this touches us in our lives?... Just in passing, you might notice that it’s the Greeks (the pagans, the down-to-earthers) who show enough curiosity to come looking for Jesus in order to discover (maybe) meaning in their lives.

Surprisingly, this Gospel reading today is placed in the center of Jesus’ ministry. And to make this point, a voice is heard from heaven coming upon Jesus and sanctioning, authenticating, formalising Jesus’ mission from the Father and bonding Jesus with the Father : ‘I have glorified it (my name), and I will glorify it again.’

This intimacy between Father and Son is very similar to the message that sets Jesus out on the road of his mission in Mark (Mk1:11) : ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you’. And in Luke (Lk3:22) “You are my Son, today I have Fathered you”. And finally it is picked up in the transfiguration scene in Mt 17:5 “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

God the Father confirms Jesus for what he says he is and this is heard by the crowd who are not sure if it is the thunder or an angel, but definitely a heavenly message. And the message is clear: this Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, is not meant for a long reign on this earth, but will die after being lifted up, and lifted up suprisingly on an instrument of torture, on a cross no less.

I often feel that the central tenets of our faith are totally unthinkable for us and lie in deep mystery, and they are beyond our comprehension. Take the incarnation: God becomes human so that humans can become divine. The Redemption: the almighty powerful God chooses weakness and death as ways to show God's supremacy over our cultural models of success and efficiency. God's champion, Jesus, is reduced to utter powerlessness in order to show the extreme concern and love that God has for humanity. God could have chosen power to bring us to power. God could have chosen many other ways as the road to follow in order to reintegrate we humans into a process of salvation. But here there is no cheap grace, no cheap salvation, only the deep acceptance of pure unadulterated faith. It sure isn't evident, and probably not naturally seductive.

Jesus' ultimate state of glorification occurs through what appears to be the absolute opposite : "I tell you, 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." The only way to bear much fruit in this life is to let go and to give way to another mode of life that seems contrary to everything we know and hold dear.

Nature provides us here with some examples : the lobster that goes into hiding and rids itself of its shell to come out as a new being; the larvae and the caterpillar that morph their whole being into something new to become butterfly and flying creatures. And yes, the grain that needs to submit to special circumstances of moisture, heat and fertilizer in order to become totally other than the appearance it held at the outset.

This acceptance of an ultimate change certainly questions our rational instincts. Can't there be an easier way? a less painful one? a more incremental one? Is there really only one way?

Jesus is very clear : Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life... Now that's a challenge! That's really risking everything...

Reminds me of the story of a photographer on the side of the Grand Canyon getting a glimpse of the fantastic scenery and colors... He gets too close to the edge and the earth gives way.

He's able to grab onto a shrub and starts yelling "help-help. Anybody up there?"
Silence.

He hears a voice saying : "How can I help you?"

And he recognizes that it's God speaking.

The man answers "Help me, just get me out of here."

God answers: "Will you do what I say?" –

And the man answers: "Yes anything. Just help me out of here."

God says "Let go of the bush." Again long silent pause...

The man then yells out: "Anybody else up there?"

Are we really willing to "lose our lives" as Jesus asks of us, or is that just too much to ask from us? What would it be if we really didn't have to die, but were invited to explore and cultivate elements within us that are more God-driven than the human elements we naturally and normally promote in our daily lives? What would those God-driven elements be? Or, what are the spontaneous elements we normally develop in our ordinary lives that we can truly do without and would ultimately need to "die" to? Those persons who chose to accumulate for themselves power, wealth, and notoriety will ultimately die suffocated by the things they have amassed, by the power that corrupts them, and by the notoriety that stifles their relationships. There are hundreds of ways in which you and I can die to ourselves, die to getting our own way, die to our ease, pleasure, and satisfaction.

Notice that in the example given by Jesus, the grain does not really die. But it does allow itself to be transformed. And, in doing that, it simply fulfills its God-given purpose from the outset. As the first reading of Jeremiah indicates: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." We all have this law of life written within us. Take an acorn, for example. The acorn has within it the whole tree: roots, trunk, branches and leaves. But you would not know it by just looking at the acorn...

But an acorn on a rock, or in dry needles, or even in a wet swamp will not get very far in discovering its potential as a tree.

If the acorn could think, it would have to look beyond its "acorn-ness" and open itself up to the fullness of creation within it. There is a gain in the letting go, in allowing other possibilities to take over. There's the gain of becoming a more caring, genuine, and generous person!

"Unless we die" can sound very harsh. But look at the consequences. Jesus is seeking to glorify God's name. And what is God's glory? Saint Irenaeus of Antioch wrote around the year 190 CE, that God's glory is a human person fully alive. The real statement is: "Life in each human is the glory of God" or again "The glory of God is humans fully alive." Not dead humans, but real live ones... God does not want us to die, but to live. But we need accept to transform ourselves, like the acorn and the butterfly.

Jesus adds:” Those who hold on to their life will lose it, and those who sacrifice this, their worldly life, will keep their life eternally. This life of sacrifice, as Jesus’ life was and is witnessed in the second reading today, is one of service to the common good, to the welfare and to the safety of the most vulnerable among us. Each of us is invited to give of our best in whatever way we can, and in so doing we will have contributed to the harvest of redemption.

In this Eucharist let us ask God that we may be given the grace to take risks for the Kingdom. (pause)

Let us now stand and profess our Faith in Christ who invites us, leads us, and gives us the strength to attain the rich harvest...

Michel Côté, O.P.