

Fifth Sunday of Lent Year "B" – Part 15

The Year "B" readings continue with the theme of death and resurrection. Holy week is only one week away. We grapple with the meaning of suffering and death. Theologically, the death and resurrection of Jesus is something called Paschal Mystery. This is one of the central tenets of the Catholic faith. The phrase Paschal Mystery was first used in a homily by Melito of Sardis back around 165 A.D. The term grew in usage over the years. Pope Benedict XVI called the Paschal Mystery the central message of the second Vatican Council. At Vatican II, it was stated that the Paschal Mystery (the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus) is at the center of what it is to be a Christian. Liturgists and preachers use this term all the time when speaking about the meaning of the Mass and the sacraments.

This Gospel about the grain of wheat dying and bearing fruit was selected to teach the elect, candidates, and all the baptized about what it means to be a follower of Christ. Jesus insightfully took a truth from nature and applied it to the human condition. In order for a seed to become what it was meant to be, it must die. Similarly, we must experience times of darkness and death in our life to mature and become what we are meant to be. Eventually, we will experience a death of another sort – physical death – that leads to a glorious new life. We see Paschal Mystery in nature (seeds, eggs, and more), mythology (the phoenix), theology, and liturgy (baptism, Mass) as well as in our own everyday life.

We all have times of darkness and death. We are all familiar with suffering, problems, and tribulations. Suffering is a mystery. It prompts questions such as: "Why am I suffering? What good can come out of this? What did I do to deserve this? Where is God?" Because suffering and life itself is a "mystery," we should not judge dark experiences based solely on externals and the way things seem. A deeper look can reveal profound truths. Death is part and parcel of life. Death can lead to new life. Jesus taught: "Only when the grain of wheat dies does it realize its potential and produce much fruit." (see John 12:24).

The Gospel tells us that Greeks (non-Jewish Gentiles) came looking for Jesus. (We all know about the wise Magi from the East who came to Jesus at his birth.) These were also wise men from the West who came to Jesus as he approached his death. They too were seeking answers. It was St. Thomas of Aquinas who stated: "Philosophy is the handmaiden of theology."

Philosophy is the pursuit of meaning. Questions are foundational to the quest of understanding: "What is the meaning of life? How can I be happy? What is truth? How can we really understand reality?" There were many Greek philosophers and philosophies. We have all heard of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and Pythagoras. Branches of philosophies include the Sophists, Cynics, Sceptics, Epicureans, and Stoics. All these varieties sought to find answers regarding the meaning of our existence.

These men coming to Jesus were seeking answers. They had most likely studied various Greek philosophies and were searching for a rationale that worked. They were looking to Jesus to give them something new and effective. They had heard and learned about many systems of thought and wanted something revolutionary. Perhaps this famed Jewish rabbi renowned for his wisdom could enlighten them. They were about to get more than they bargained for.

Jesus knew who they were and what they wanted. He gave them something so profound they probably missed its implication, and they probably did not understand even what Jesus was saying. Jesus, in his usual puzzling style, answered their quest for a new philosophy with something so radical and revolutionary they probably did not know what he meant or what to do with what he told them.

In answer to their query, Jesus said: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it just remains a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24). They probably looked at each other and thought: "What in the world does he mean?"

Christianity proclaims many profound truths, with the Paschal Mystery (death and resurrection) at the forefront. To follow Jesus, we must grasp this foundational concept.

In our life, there must be deaths for growth to occur. In a way, our humanity is like a seed with enormous potential. Jesus clearly taught that we must die to self to find our true self and really live. The journey of Lent and of life is a journey from selfishness to selflessness. To become generous and a person for others, we must say "No" to our selfish wants and desires. Life is not "all about me."

Those adept in the spiritual life talk about the ego and false self. This erroneous self is constructed from the influence of our culture, our relationships, and our own personal choices. Attitudes like the mores (people's attitude towards learning) we learn from television, the tendencies we adapt from the Internet, as well as watching how others react all contribute to the self-construct. We are all socialized and learn how to behave from friends and family. All these factors together can contribute to the development of our false self. We watch others and see how they handle circumstances and relationships. We choose the way we want to be. In addition, we have all been infected with original sin, and this fatal disease skews our self-concept and affects our behaviors. We embrace a way of interacting with others and a self-image based on externals instead of what is innermost. To come to our truest self, we must die to sin and what is false, transcend slanted notions, and discover our truest self.

Paul the apostle said: "I die daily." (1 Corinthians 15:31). Certainly he was talking about the dangers he faced. But he was also the one who introduced us to the theology of: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20). In time, Paul realized that a new person, a new creation, was emerging. He was not who or what he used to be. He was now one with Christ and "in Christ." He was discovering his true identity and who he really was. Someone who had a near-death experience once wrote: "The first person you will meet in heaven is yourself. For the first time you will understand who you truly are."

We become new creations in Christ through grace. In this supernatural process, we die to selfishness, pride, and the false self. As a follower of Jesus you come to a whole new sense of self. Instead of being a selfish person a whole new person is emerging that is positive, generous, outgoing, and caring. You develop courage and self-control. Self-control does not happen immediately. This virtue, like all others, is progressive. As a fruit of the Holy Spirit, self-control ripens over time. For this change to occur, one has to suffer many daily deaths.

Jesus taught: "Take up your cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23). Hebrews tells us that Jesus himself learned obedience through what he suffered. (Hebrews 5:8). Jesus' sufferings were not just physical. He also endured emotional, psychological, and physical sufferings in Gethsemane as but one example. He was betrayed and denied by his closest followers, and this caused great anguish in his heart. Obedience was earned as he fully assented to God's will during his trials.

Following Jesus is a daily lifestyle of obedience and self surrender. Most times it is taught that the crosses in our life are our daily physical and relational sufferings. That may be, but biblically, our cross is the daily obedient choices we must make to yield ourselves to God. Many of these choices are hard and go against what we want. There are no padded crosses. The cross is an instrument of pain and leads to death. Those (2)

who invented the cross had extreme torture in mind. The journey of Lent and of life is a surrender of our very self to God and to others. This will involve suffering and death to self.

When the seed dies, what is the fruit that is borne? Are we becoming a person of love? Are we helping to touch and change lives? Is the fruit that is borne within us that of helping people come to the faith and receiving eternal life. Do we embrace death of self for others, so that we may live with significance and fruitfulness. This is the Paschal Mystery: the seed dies and something new is produced.

Darkness and Life

Besides the deaths we must undergo psychologically and spiritually, Paschal Mystery shows itself in our physical experiences. It all began with conception in the darkness of our mother's womb. God knits us together and, finally, something new happened. When the time was right, we were born. Out of darkness a death occurred regarding our embryonic existence. We cried because of the radical change. Often change comes from darkness and tears.

St. John of the Cross wrote about the "Dark night" in his poem. He wrote that there must be a purgation of our souls regarding its affections towards created things. Secondly, there must be spiritual purgation's on the way to divine union. As we journey through life, we must all be purged of our attachments to idols and attractions that consume us. We must lose our clinging even to our body, giftedness, youth, beauty, health, and self. Life is a series of letting go. Eventually, at our death, we must surrender back to God all we have been given.

We are warned: "Do not love the world or the things in the world." (1 John 2:15). The world and its attractions vie for our attention and devotion. How easily we fall into that trap. John ends his first letter emphatically with: "Keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21).

Our purgation's, deaths, and darkness will finally give way to illumination. This is the journey of Lent: the purification of our senses and heart so that we may be illumined and enlightened by God. There must be many times of letting go. Do not try to hold onto the way things were but accept where we are now and believe in the future ahead of us. Letting go and giving ourselves to God in every instance is a lifestyle of surrender. The better we become at surrendering to God, the greater we will grow.

Transformation Through Pain

God has a way of bringing new life out of tough circumstances. Paschal Mystery happens on many different levels: psychologically, spiritually, and attitudinally. On every level, God is at work bringing newness and fruit out of the sufferings and deaths that occur. One major example of this happened in the early Church.

After some initial successes in preaching and spreading the Gospel, the disciples of Jesus met with severe persecution. The deacon Stephen was put to death by stoning. Saul (soon-to-be Paul) was consenting to his death. Then we read: "On that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout..." (Acts 8:1). Ironically, it was the darkness and death brought about by the persecution that led to the Church being scattered and to grow.

It was the Church Father Tertullian who said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." (Apologeticus Chapter 50). By some mysterious fashion, the Church grows when evil comes against it.

Jesus' philosophy was new, radical, and wise. The Greeks heard, but probably did not grasp this concept. A seed must die to bear fruit. This wisdom is Paschal Mystery. We too must die to become all who we are meant to be. Out of darkness comes new life. We also bear fruit by helping others.

The Greeks who approach Jesus most likely did not understand the profound truth Jesus was giving them in his teaching. The reason this Gospel is presented to us during Lent is so the elect, the candidates, and the baptized will come to understand that bearing fruit is one of the purposes of life. To live and bear fruit, we must die. Do not be afraid of this process, and don't be confused either when it happens. Be fruitful. Our death is a natural part of living. We are now the seed who will one day be in eternity. Let God make you a channel of his peace.

Lenten Lessons:

- Paschal Mystery means death and resurrection
- Death can lead to new life
- Transformation comes through pain and darkness
- We can become a light to others and bear fruit

Lenten Action:

- Pray about your suffering and your death

