

5TH SUNDAY OF LENT, B

TRANSCENDING THE SELF TO EMBRACE THE CROSS

"I tell you, most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (Jn. 12: 24)

"I tell you, most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest": These words of Jesus could have stunned his listeners very deeply because it is an unusual paradox and imagery. The juxtaposition of dying and giving life is not a thought that we readily perceive even in our age of swollen knowledge. But as confusing as this is, it conveys such depth of wisdom that has become a common feature in the teaching of Christ. We are familiar with such sayings as: "He who saves his life will lose it"; "He who humbles himself will be exalted"; "The narrow gate leads to life." No doubts these words challenge us to rise above the self which pulls us down and embrace that higher goal of selflessness. As I reflect on these, my mind goes to two great characters who distinguished themselves in selfless service for the good of others – St Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, both gave up something to dedicate their lives to the service of the poor. St Francis was the son of a wealthy silk merchant. He abandoned renounced his father and his patrimony, walked away naked to embrace a life of poverty. He spent his life as a beggar to restore ruined chapel in response to a vision he had. He founded the Franciscan Order, who till today are involved in the various apostolate to the poor. Only a life spent on others will be glorified here in this world and in Heaven. Similarly, Mother Teresa 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." Examples of these great characters abound from different professions and vocations. The world as we see it today owes so much to men and women who make extreme sacrifices for the good of others. It would be safe to say that we are all who and what we are today because someone somewhere sacrificed something.

Christ for the Greeks and for All: The encounter with the Greeks that necessitated the message of Jesus in today's gospel is only recorded in John's Gospel. This is natural because the Gospel of John was written to explain the Christian faith in a way that is understandable to the Greeks. The emergence of the Greeks in the scene marked the fulfilment of the global mission of Christ. The mission of Christ, the salvation He wrought was for the entire human race, Jews and Greeks alike, the Hebrews no less than the Gentiles. Jesus, in John 10: 16, spoke of His mission to unite all His sheep, including the "ones that are not of this fold" into "one flock" under one leadership so that "there would be only one flock and one shepherd." Jesus came to die, not for a single nation but "to gather together in unity the scattered children of God" (Jn. 11: 51-52). The Ancient Greeks were wanderers of the Ancient world in search of the truth. Thus their presence in Jerusalem at the time of the festival was no surprise and

even of lesser surprise is their desire to meet Jesus. Archbishop John Wilson of Southwark adds a beautiful insight that points to the curiosity of the Greeks: "They were intrigued by the Lord Jesus. They'd heard about Him, heard from Him, and wanted to know more. They sensed that here was something. More than this, here was someone new. And they were right. Their expectation was raised; their interest was captured. They had an openness which every disciple needs. No matter how long we have been following the Lord Jesus, we have not properly understood Him if we think there is nothing new to come." Let our hearts burn in search of Jesus, Who is "The Way, The Truth, and The Life" (Jn. 14:6). The Psalmist says: "Let the heart that seek the Lord rejoice" (Ps. 105: 3).

Christ, The Grain of Wheat; We the Harvest: Jesus was a Teacher and a Doer of His teachings. The above statement, first and foremost, referred to the ultimate prize He would pay to save humanity – by dying on the cross so that we may have life in full (Jn. 10: 10). Consciously and freely, Jesus, in obedience to the father's Will, offers His Life in sacrifice on the Cross. His Death is "the hour" of His glory. The Cross was His glory and He was glorified through the Cross. It is only through death that resurrection is possible. Jesus is the "grain of wheat" and we are the "harvest." So the "grain of wheat" dies on the Cross so that the "harvest" would be rich. The death of Christ is an invitation to us to die to ourselves, as when He says: "Anyone who wants to be a follower of Mine must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me." (Lk. 9: 23; Matt. 16: 24; Mk. 8: 34). This is an invitation to self-transformation; a call to become "new creatures" in Christ. A man must die to his sinful self to be alive to others: die to his ego to appreciate others; die to greed to be charitable; die to malice to be forgiving; die to pride in order to be humble. Indeed, to die is to live.

Loving and Hating This Life: Jesus says: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in the world will persevere to the end." The life of true discipleship is a life of detachment from this world and the things that hinder our good relationship with Christ. And the true love of self is the denial of self for the sake of gaining eternal life. It is only by self-denial, carrying one's cross daily, that we can truly walk with Him. The Cross is a sign of our bond with Him. The Cross is a sign of obedience, self-sacrifice and love. The Cross is our nobility and honours subtle as it may be. Perhaps, one of the benefits of coronavirus pandemic is that it has helped humanity to discover its vulnerability and the need for one another. It has broken the walls of selfishness in most people and ushered them into the halls of indiscriminate love and shared responsibility. The many nurses, doctors, social workers, carers, those in emergency services, priests and many others who have laid their lives for the sake of others are the heroes and heroines of these unprecedented times. When the nation throws its windows and doors to applaud the selfless services of our frontline workers, we do so without self-interest, and we offer it as an appreciation of these true servants, who have lived the challenge of the gospel of selflessness in their own ways. This is the living out "New Covenant" of love, where humanity is no longer motivated by law but by love, where the heart and not the head guides

our loving actions. These are “The days” that Jeremiah refers to in our First Reading (Jer. 31: 31-34).

Dear friends, let us not allow ourselves to be swallowed up in the misguided perception of victory as a conquest. What Jesus offers us is a new view of victory as a cross, self-denial, a life lived for the benefit of others. That victory can only be gained by defeating our sinful self in order to produce the rich harvest of love and generosity. It is by dying that we are born to eternal life. May the grace of God be sufficient for us.