

Lent 5

Jesus is Glorified in His Death on the Cross

It may seem like a tremendous paradox: We Christians – especially Catholic Christians - believe in the preciousness of each human life. In the early Church, Christians were known for rescuing babies left on trash heaps to die. Human life was considered cheap in those days (and increasingly in our time), but for Christians very precious. Still, when asked to deny their Lord and worship Caesar instead, Christians willingly even joyfully faced death. A contradiction? Jesus explains in today's Gospel that life is as precious as what we are willing to lay it down for. He compares our life to a grain of wheat which must fall to the ground to produce fruit. Otherwise, it remains locked inside its protective hull but doing no good.

Now facing death can be literal or figurative, as when we “die” to our own preferences, our own comfort or convenience, our plans for our life. We are speaking of suffering for doing what's right. Jesus tells us that if we “love” our life to the exclusion of suffering, we lose our souls. In Jesus' case, Jesus refused to deny that He is the Son of God. He could have saved Himself from the horror of the Cross, but would have completely contradicted His reason for coming into the world, to save our souls. Christians throughout the centuries have faced this. In the early Church people routinely lost their property and sometimes their lives for their faith. Such martyrdom continues today in many places. Christians in Mosul, Iraq under the ISIS onslaught in 2014, fled with nothing but their clothes rather than deny their Christian faith. Right here in the U.S., we – even children – can often face ridicule for our faith these days. We might be tempted to hide our faith.

Whenever we suffer discomfort, loss, or pain in some way for doing the right thing, we are the grain of wheat falling to the ground producing good fruit.

Whenever a young man or woman decides to marry and raise a family – or decides for priesthood or religious life –

When a woman carries her child to term -

When a child embraces an outcast at school at the cost of being made fun of -

When we place our lives on the line to protect others like the teacher in FL who hid students in a closet and stood outside to shield them -

When we tell the truth when a lie or silence would be more expedient, then we are being the grain of wheat.

We are choosing inconvenience, hard work, pain, unpopularity, or as in the teacher's case death for that which is of even greater value than our earthly existence. This is the way of true love and of eternal (divine) life.

Jesus says: "Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am, there will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me."

"When I am lifted up, the world will be judged for what it is and the ruler of this world – Satan – will be driven out." Each grain of wheat, each embrace of the more difficult path, is part of God's ultimate victory over evil – and the salvation of our souls.