

5th Sunday in Lent Year B

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Life begins in loss! In the act of birth we were pushed out from the warm womb of our mother, then dragged helpless into the big world of watching adults. Disconnected from our mother, we screamed and protested as we were held upside down in the hands of a stranger who slapped us. What a welcome! Our new separateness was frightening. Even though we were returned to our mother, we inhabited a space that was different from hers. **To gain a place in the new world, we first had to lose our place in the old one.** The act of birth is inseparable from the pain of letting go. That was our first education. Life began with a loss!

When we think of loss we usually have in mind the loss of some loved one in death. But the experience of loss plays a constant part in our lives: we lose not only by someone's death, but by leaving and being left, by letting go and moving on, by relinquishing our worldly and false dreams. Throughout our lives we have to face a whole series of necessary losses, people and relationships and attachments we have to give up if we are to grow. Our gradual development is

marked by renunciation, for it is only through losses that we learn to change and adapt and make new gains. No pain, no gain.

As we grow older we have to let go of our youthful good health, smart and pretty faces, our perfect vision and hearing, our waistline, our earnestness to save the world, our unreal expectations of others, our naïve belief in the ongoing progress of the earth. The time comes when we have to let go of life itself, and that final act can be as painful a leave-taking as the act of birth. But unless we leave this world we can't enter the next; *Unless we are friends with change, loss and suffering we will not know the friendship of growth and fruitfulness.*

This is the key reality of life taught us by the Cross of Christ. We fight against it but life and God constantly offer change and growth through losses. In today's Gospel, Jesus's death is ahead of him, the hour has come. The pilgrims are arriving in Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, including some Greek converts who want to see Jesus. At this Passover feast the sacrificial lamb will be Jesus himself. Jesus too must face the loss of freedom, the loss of his friends and family, the loss of support, and the loss of his own life.

Not surprisingly, all this loss troubles him as he says "Now is my soul troubled" – In the other three Gospels Jesus has his agony on the mount of Olives, when he anguished over his approaching death, hoping and praying that this cup of suffering might pass according to his own human will, but then praying that the will of his Father be done. But in John's Gospel there is no agony scene. Jesus

is troubled but he has been waiting for this hour where he could glorify God. In this portrayal, Jesus is aware that loss and suffering cannot be avoided if the Father's name is to be glorified and the world saved. There is going to be gain from the pain, there is going to be glory from the shameful way of the cross.

Jesus' loss is our gain. His radical act of self-forgetfulness stands at the centre of the Christian Story. He is the grain of wheat that died in order to bear much fruit. That is why the cross has such a position of prominence wherever Christians gather. The great loss of Jesus' life – and the loss was great – has become in time the ground of our hope. It points us beyond the reality of suffering to the reality of Easter.

In the midst of our own loss, however, it is difficult to imagine what good can emerge from the pain. Sometimes the pain can reduce us to silence, or to depression, so that we become dumb witnesses preoccupied with our own afflictions. Few of us can see any point to pain at the time of our loss and suffering, often the pain is the fact that it all seems pointless. The Christian community needed time to make sense of the death of Jesus, they needed help to see that their immense loss was more than a terrible accident, with the coming of the Holy Spirit on them they were able to see and understand. We too need time and help, comfort. Only then can we look back, like the Gospel does, and cherish what good has emerged from our losses, pain and sufferings.

Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Spe Salvi* writes “*We can try to limit suffering, to fight against it, but we cannot eliminate it. It is when we attempt to*

avoid suffering by withdrawing from anything that might involve hurt, when we try to spare ourselves the effort and pain of pursuing truth, love, and goodness, that we drift into a life of emptiness, in which there may be almost no pain, but the dark sensation of meaninglessness and abandonment is all the greater. It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love.

The Gospel teaches us that new life and eternal life are possible only by the losses and death of the self through suffering and service. Our covenant with God can never be complete if we are not ready to take his path of suffering. By his cross, he showed us an example we should follow. ***A true Christian does not seek comfort at the expense of growth in God.*** This is why Jesus says, ***“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in the world will keep it for eternal life”*** Salt gives its taste by dissolving in water. A candle gives light by burning its wick and melting its wax. We are sanctified through suffering with Christ for others. As Winston Churchill said *“We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give”*