

Today our Lenten journey takes us to a festival and attending the festival are some Greeks. The mention of Greeks in our Gospel for today is important. They were the explorers and wanderers of the ancient world and they were seekers of the truth. We can surmise that these Greeks were what was known as “God-fearers” who attended Jewish synagogues and festivals. Their inclusion in this narrative has meaning because it is symbolic of the coming of Gentiles to worship God through Christ.

As we enter into the fifth week of our Lenten journey, we can see that throughout this time Jesus has been moving toward Calvary, moving toward the tomb. We see in verse 23 that Jesus is very aware of where he is in terms of the journey when he says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”.

The great statesman, Winston Churchill, once said, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” Jesus is aware that he is going to give the ultimate for the sake of humanity. Our lessons to this point in time all point to Jesus having to forfeit something, as he gets closer to the cross.

For most people, death is not something to be discussed casually and for many the subject is strictly off limits. We need to understand that for Jesus death was in a meaningful way his entrance into glory. His willingness to continue on the road to Calvary and to die on that cross signals his absolute obedience to God the Father. Having traveled this far on our Lenten journey it is critical that we look back and forward in terms of better understanding what this special season is all about.

Lent is that liturgical season of the church’s calendar year where we focus on the cost of following Christ. Lent is a time of sacrifice, penance, prayer, solemn worship and singing solemn hymns, in preparation for, or recollection of our baptism in Christ, as we prepare for the celebration of Easter. Lent is about losing our lives by giving them to Christ and finding eternal life by finding Christ within us. Lent is about loss. It’s about losing ourselves in order to find our lives. We probably should pause here and reflect on our other theme this week- the Annunciation on Thursday-note that Gabriel did not spell out all the details of being “the favoured one” for Mary. Being called the favoured one did not mean that Mary was to have a life of peace with no problems or pain. The very fact that the birth of her child raised questions in the minds of many people meant that she was to have a rough start in her marriage to Joseph. Although her son did become popular and was held in high esteem by many of the faithful, he soon encountered much criticism. In the end Mary had to bear the embarrassment and agony of the arrest, trial, and death upon the cross of her beloved son. Only as we look back through the lens of the resurrection do we grasp the full meaning of Gabriel’s words: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.”

Jesus tells us, if we will but listen, that “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 analogy of a kernel of wheat dying in the ground and producing many seeds teaches that death is necessary for a harvest. The wheat analogy illustrates a general paradoxical principle: Death is the way to life. In Jesus’ case, his death led to glory and life not only for himself but also for others.

We can see that in the case of his followers both then and now, the principle remains the same. In order to find the life that Jesus would have us live, we must first “hate” the life we have. That is a difficult idea to handle. Of course Jesus is not talking about hating the things you now love or turning your back on your world. Jesus is saying that there is a giving up that must take place, and that in the case of our relationship to him, this giving away has to do with letting go of self-

centeredness and letting go of anything, that has the potential to come between you and him. In other words anything in your life right now that hinders you from being part of Jesus' life must be rejected. The essence of the good news of Jesus Christ is all about loss. An authentic gospel life begins with that recognition. It begins with dying. It begins with a difficult journey to the cross. The true gospel is not just about you coming to Jesus as you are; it's about you being baptised in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's about you forfeiting your former life and gaining a new life in Christ. This season is about losing. It's about loss. It's about giving up self-centred space in our lives for God.

This whole idea flies directly into the face of our way of living, at least it is for those of us living in the West. I say that because our modern philosophy of life is a matter of holding on to and hanging in. Jesus' words that "we must lose our lives" create for many of us a major conflict of interest. We can't sleep. We are overworked and underpaid. Our minds are constantly going. We are walking on eggshells, looking over our shoulders, and waiting for some disaster to strike.

The truth remains that we are called to follow Jesus exactly as the early disciples followed him. Being a servant of Jesus requires following him even and especially when it is uncomfortable. And we cannot forget that many of his early followers did die! As St Paul so eloquently puts in his letter to the Romans "And since we are his children, we will share his treasures - for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering" (Romans 8:17).

Our Lenten journey has clearly shown us that Jesus spent the majority of his life showing his disciples and people in general signs and wonders, yet they still did not believe. He spent his life preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God, about blessedness, righteousness, and truth; yet they still did not believe. He spent his life healing the sick, casting out devils, and raising the dead; yet, they still did not believe.

This always raises the question of what we are to do as his followers. If people had such a hard time believing Jesus while they were quite literally in his presence, what on earth can we do right now to convince people that Jesus was who he said he was?

That is why it is so important to watch what you say and do, as you represent yourself as a Christian. What you say and how you present yourself to the wider community are all indications of what you believe, and how what you believe, effects how you live. The truth is that these are the things people will look at in how they evaluate who you are, and will determine to a large degree how people understand your vocation with Christ.

Watch what you say when people question you. How we say what we have to say and how we voice the things that do not please us is an indicator of how we see life and the living of it.

Solomon said for every matter under heaven there is a time and a season; a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. This is our season. God has prepared us for this season so that God may be glorified, not us. So that when we come through this period of our life, a time to be born or a time to die, people will be able to look at us and know without question, without a word of doubt, that it was nothing but the grace of God that brought us through.

Lent is a reminder that God would not have brought us to such a time as this, if God did not know that we were prepared for it. Your response and mine, as we go through this season we call life is, "Father, glorify thy name." Be glorified in the heavens. Be glorified in the earth. Be glorified in me,

if it be your will. Having said this, we are still faced with the universal question on the lips of anyone who is losing their health; anyone coping with the loss of a loved one, and the question is, “Tell me God, tell me how is it that you are being glorified in my misery? Tell me, preacher, how is God glorified while I see my family struggle and stress?”

The answer is that God is glorified in our willingness to fall before him. God is glorified when we are willing to humble ourselves in God’s presence. Like the grain or a seed, we must be willing to fall to the ground and be absorbed by it. A seed is no good and serves no purpose if it is not planted. As long as it remains above ground, where it can be seen, it remains sterile. Just so with all of us; we have no purpose, we make no lasting difference in our community, we have no growth, and there is no fruit of the spirit in our lives if we are not firmly planted in the soil of Jesus Christ. Lent reminds us that without Jesus there is no real love, no joy, no peace, no patience, no kindness, no goodness, no faithfulness, no gentleness, and no self-control. To gain our lives in Christ we must be willing to lose ourselves in Christ. **We must be willing to lose our identity in order to gain our spirituality.**

The good news of the gospel is this, if you are willing to lose your life, to let those worldly concerns die, then you shall gain it. God will be glorified in the life you receive after this temporary existence. You will gain your purpose with the Prince of Peace. Those who seek to save their lives shall lose it and those who hate their lives shall gain eternal life.

Jesus uses himself as the quintessential premise that even the best of us can still get better. As glorious as Jesus was, he was yet to be glorified. There was still a level of glory for him to ascend. He had yet to be at his best.

I would have thought he was glorified when the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended upon him and God said this is my beloved Son, in whom I’m well pleased but that was not Jesus at his best. I thought maybe he was at his best when Jesus stood on the bow of a boat in the midst of a raging sea, and said, “Peace be still” and the roaring seas became calm, still waters. The winds slowed down to a nice summer breeze. Yet, he was not at his best. Some would have surmised that Jesus was at his best when he raised Lazarus from the dead. But he was still not at his best.

No, Jesus was at his best when he carried an old, rugged cross to a hill called Calvary. Jesus was at his best when he allowed his enemies to nail him to that cross; and yet, pray, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Jesus was at his best when he allowed the cross to mock his name, pierce him in his side, and place a crown of thorns on his head, when he could have called down the host of heaven to deliver him from that cross. Jesus was at his best when he called out, “It is finished. Into thy hands, Father, do I commend my Spirit.” Jesus was at his best when he allowed them to bury his body in a borrowed tomb. Jesus was at his best when on the third day, he rose, and stood before his disciples and declared, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

Listen to me: Your best moment is just ahead. Jesus has got the victory, and he has given you power to be his witness to the uttermost parts of the world. And to that we should all say, “Amen.”

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