

Fifth Sunday of Lent (B)

March 17, 2024

“I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?”

My dear friends in Christ, something feels different this week. Something feels a little more somber, a little more heartbreaking, a little more ominous. A week from now we will begin our journey through the holiest week of the Church year. We're that close. And the Gospel passage today from John which we just heard proclaimed, has a different tone to it, right? Something has somehow changed as we have made our journey with Jesus through this season of Lent. Four weeks ago (if you remember) we began this holy season by hearing about the Lord Jesus being tempted in the desert. From which I remind you to join me to the desert where we belong. Then we heard about the Transfiguration, and then the money changers in the temple, and then Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, but this Gospel passage, well, this one - it's taken a turn, a turn for the worse? For the better? Maybe both?

I'm struck by two things in this passage from St. John's Gospel. One is the profundity of statement after statement from the mouth of Jesus.

“The hour has come . . . unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies . . . Whoever loves his life loses it . . . where I am, there also my servants will be . . . Father, glorify your name . . . Now is the time of judgment on this world . . . I will draw everything to myself.”

That's a long list of some pretty profound statements. Philip and Andrew must have looked at each other in awe, confusion, and disbelief. They might have thought to themselves that, whatever this whole thing had started out as, they were now in deeper than they ever could have imagined. In the beginning it might have been the simple attraction of a

few interesting things he said, or the handful of people he cured or helped in some way, but now it was heading to a dramatic, dangerous outcome. This man, Jesus, wasn't simply their friend anymore. He was something and someone much greater.

The second thing that strikes me in this passage is the glimpse into Jesus' humanity. It's easy to miss, if we're not careful, given all those statements I listed above. Yet, there it is - smack dab in the middle of the passage. Remember I opened this homily with it.

“I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?”

I am troubled now Here we have Jesus saying all these profound things, and all of a sudden he says something as simple and transparent as, “I am troubled now.” And when Jesus says things like that I often think to myself that Jesus is more like me than I give him credit for, more like me than I can imagine, more like US than even seems possible. Who among us hasn't thought at one time or another (or maybe every day). “I am troubled now.” There might be nothing more human than that, for we know from experience that life can be hard, life can be disappointing, life can be filled with challenges and obstacles and sorrow and all sorts of things that we would rather avoid, step around, not have to deal with.

Jesus doesn't end there, though. Rather, he follows it up with a question, a question for himself, and for Peter and Andrew and for each of us today. After telling them that he is troubled he asks,

“Yet what should I say?”

Yet what should I say? In some ways, that question lies at the very heart of this holy season and at the heart of what it means to live a good life, a holy life, a Christian life, a God-centered life. This simple question invites you and me to give a response, encourages us to give a response, one might even say “it demands” that we give a response. But what? What will our response be? What will our lives say?

It's relatively easy to do the right thing, the good thing, the holy thing when times are good, when our lives are unfolding as planned, when we are happy and healthy. The real challenge, of course, the real "test" of our commitment to God is what we do when things aren't going well, when things are all messed up, when our hearts are "troubled". What do we say then? What do we do then?

For Jesus, there was only one answer. He would love anyway. People ridiculed him but he loved them anyway. People unfairly criticized him yet he loved anyway. People were suspicious of him in spite of that he loved anyway. People threatened him and he loved anyway. People arrested him and still loved anyway. People beat him and led him up a lonely hill but he loved anyway. People even put him to death and, well, you know, but we'll save that story for a couple of weeks from now.

Loving that deeply and that unconditionally and relentlessly is tough. It may even seem impossible. But it is not. God made us or created us to love, and he knows that we are capable of acts of goodness and kindness beyond measure. But he will never force us. Rather, he reaches out his hand and says, "Follow me."

That's the kind of self-emptying Jesus did, not simply on Calvary, but every second of every day of his life. And he wants the same from us and for us, he wants us to be that grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, wants us to lose our lives for the sake of others, wants us to love and love and love some more.

My dear friends, some of us may be in a very good place. Others of us, well, we might have hearts that are troubled. Yet, for a true follower of Jesus, for those of us who are trying to do the right thing, for those of us who want to live a "good" life, for those of us who are simply trying to do what God asks of us as best we can, the most faithful response is the same in either case. . . .

Let's love.

And it's Jesus who will show us how.

A Short Story

Horror gripped the heart of a First World War soldier, as he saw his lifelong friend fall in battle. The soldier asked his Lieutenant if he could go out to bring his fallen comrade back. "You can go," said the Lieutenant, "but don't think it will be worth it. Your friend is probably dead and you may throw your life away." "The Lieutenant's words didn't matter, and the soldier went anyway. Miraculously, he managed to reach his friend, lifted him up onto his shoulder and brought him back to their company's trench. The officer checked the wounded soldier, and then looked kindly at his friend. "I told you it wouldn't be worth it," he said. "Your friend is dead and you are mortally wounded." "It was worth it, Sir," said the soldier. "What do you mean by worth it?" responded the Lieutenant. "Your friend is dead." "Yes Sir," the soldier answered, "but it was worth it because when I got to him, he was still alive and I had the satisfaction of hearing him say...."Jim...I knew you'd come."