

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (2024 - B)

Today we celebrate the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Traditionally, this Sunday was known as Passion Sunday. On this Sunday, the Crucifix and statues in Church were covered with purple cloth, and there was a reason for this.

It was to remind us that Easter is now just two weeks away, and Lent is drawing to a close. At the beginning of Lent, we focused more on ourselves, and our spiritual lives, and on our need to be renewed. We were urged to pray more, to do penance and to give alms as ways overcoming our faults and sins and of growing in God's love.

Now, with Passion Sunday, the Church turns our attention more directly to our Blessed Lord and to His suffering and death on the cross, to the tree of life by which we were saved. We are also reminded that sin was the cause of all the pain and suffering that Jesus endured.

During these last two weeks before Easter, the Church will remind us of how Jesus gave His life for us. Next week, in the Holy Gospel for Palm Sunday, we will hear of how Jesus was arrested and tortured before being nailed to the cross. On Holy Thursday, we will recall the Last Supper and of how on the night before He died, He instituted the Eucharist at the first Mass, and later, of how Judas betrayed Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then on Good Friday, we will re-live His Passion and Death once more.

Today, on this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we begin in earnest our reflections on our Lord's Passion and death. In our holy gospel, we are told that **"unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat."** In other words, unless the grain of wheat, the seed, is sacrificed, there cannot be new life.

Now this grain of wheat stands for Jesus. It refers to the fact that Jesus would be sacrificed and die on the cross so that we could have new life. To put it another way, unless He died, our sins could not have been forgiven.

Note something else here. Jesus went on to say that **"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be."** In other words, to have new life, we too must die, but our death won't be a physical death. Rather, our death must be a death to sin.

In other words, we must die to our selfishness and self-indulgence. We must die to our egotistical and self-centered ideas. We must be humble and not proud. Most of all, we must strive to overcome our sinfulness, and this will not be easy for any of us. To do these things truly does require that we die to self if we are to live and produce much fruit.

So, why do this? Why should we try to become more than we are? Why expend all of this energy? Why do these things? Why not just do the minimum rather than more? Well, one reason is that our lives will go better. We will feel better. We will have fewer conflicts to deal with and less turmoil in our lives.

However, there is another reason, a better reason, and, as the Church will remind us in these next two weeks, that reason is love. We will see the Father's love for us, He who sent His Son to save us, and we will see the Son's love for us, He who suffered and died for us.

We will see this love when our dear Lord was betrayed by Judas who was His chosen friend and apostle; we will see this love in His agony in the garden; we will see it in the ridicule and mockery which He endured at the home of the High Priest; we will see it in His scourging and in the crown of thorns pressed down upon His Sacred Head. Finally, we will see this love as He carried His cross to Calvary, that place where He was crucified and died.

We will see His great love for us, we who are sinners. And how can we be indifferent to that? How can we remain unmoved in the face of that? How can we not be filled with sorrow for our sins and filled with an intense desire to abandon them?

We need to remember that it was our sins, your sins and my sins, which drove the nails through our dear Lord's hands and feet. I held the nail and you pounded with the hammer. I picked the thorns and you wove the crown. I mocked and hit Him while you spit upon Him. I stood on one side beating Him with the scourge while you stood on the other and did the same. Each of us has played our part in His torture, crucifixion and death; each of us had a part to play in the death of our Savior, and yet, He loves us still. So how can our hearts remain unmoved?

As we consider all of this, how can we not do our utmost to renounce our faults and failings, to give up our sins and to live as we should with love for God and neighbor? Indeed, that is what we have been doing all this Lent.

We have been praying more often, going to daily Mass, going to Stations of the Cross. We have been doing penance, abstaining from meat on Fridays, fasting, giving up things or doing something extra. We have been making efforts to be more generous to the poor. All of these things indicate that we serious about our faith and that we want to grow in God's love.

Now, one more thing remains, and that is to ask God's pardon for our sins, and to use the Sacrament of Penance. Now is the time to go to Confession. Besides our regular times, there will be extra times for individual confessions during Holy Week. In addition, there will be a Communal Penance next Sunday evening at Saint Patrick's with two priests hearing confessions.

Now, in these last two weeks before Easter, is the time to ask the Lord's pardon for your sins, for the times you hammered the nails into His hands and feet. For the times that you pushed the crown of thorns down upon His sacred head. For the times that you mocked Him and spit upon Him. For all of those times when you disobeyed His commandments. For all those times when you did not behave as the son or daughter of God that you are.

If you have not been to Confession in some time, let me remind you that it was Jesus who gave us this Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the ordinary way in which our sins are forgiven. So, if you haven't been going to Confession regularly or haven't been for some time, you really need to ask yourself why is that? Why have I decided I do not need this Sacrament?

Is it because you just got out of the habit? Well then get back into it. Is it because you never learned how to go or have forgotten what to do? No matter. Just tell the priest that you need some help, and he will help you.

Is it because you were told you don't need to go because you can go directly to the Lord? Well that is not the whole story. If it were, then why did Jesus give authority to the Apostles to forgive sins in His name when He said, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them?" In fact, Jesus gave us this Sacrament so that we could know for certain that our sins are forgiven.

Do you not go to confession because you have been hurt by a priest or some other member of the Church? If so, on behalf of the Church and myself, I ask pardon. Do not let the human weakness of others keep you from God's grace. No one is perfect but God. So, find forgiveness in your heart and seek it in return.

Do you not go because of some serious sin for which you are ashamed? That's all the more reason to go. Jesus is rich in mercy. So let Him heal you and restore you to His grace.

Is it because you don't believe in Confession? Then pray and study about confession. Read up on it in the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#). There you will find this Sacrament described in great detail with explanations and many references from the Sacred Scriptures.

Lastly, is it because you believe that you are sinless? In other words, that you are a great saint. Well, perhaps that's true, but I would remind you that Saint John the Apostle said and I quote, **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."** So, before you say, "I am sinless" you had best pray especially hard to the Holy Spirit that He help you see yourself as God sees you and reveal anything that might be displeasing to Him.

In our Holy Gospel today, Jesus told us that **"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life."** Then He said, **"Now is the time of judgement on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out."**

In saying these things, Jesus was thinking about the death He would soon undergo. By His death, He would drive out the evil one, the ruler of this world, and He would establish a new covenant in His blood. Then everyone **"from the least to greatest, shall know Him."** Then His law will be written on our hearts, and He will be our God and we shall be His people.

So, then, over these next two weeks, let us continue our Lenten journey with the help of God's grace. Let us renew our efforts to grow in holiness and to overcome the sin in our lives. Let us go to Confession. Let us die to ourselves, to our worldly aspirations and our sinful habits. Let us put God first in all that we do. And, let us remember that **"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat."**

Do these things, and you will be ready to celebrate with great joy and with a clear conscience, the glorious feast of Easter. Amen.