

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2021

Such a busy and disturbing week. In the wake of the shooting in Atlanta, let's pray for any of Asian descent that live in fear, and let's also pray for those who fear misguided and pointless violence. Let's also pray for the folks in the LGBTQ community who may also live in fear – fear of rejection by those who profess to love them. What the Catholic church has said was devastating to many in that community, and they are in need of our prayers and our love and acceptance. As a reminder, they are all always welcome to join us at the table, where they will be met with welcome and acceptance and not condemnation. But let's also offer prayers of gratitude for some important birthdays – yesterday was the birthday of both Fred Rogers and Big Bird – both important signs of hope and faith for an uncountable number of people. Let's give thanks for these figures of hope and love.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Praying together:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us now pray together the collect of the day.

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Hebrew Scripture
Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The Response
Psalm 51:1-13
Miserere mei, Deus

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

2 Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you only have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight.

5 And so you are justified when you speak
and upright in your judgment.

6 Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth,
a sinner from my mother's womb.

7 For behold, you look for truth deep within me,
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.

8 Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure;
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

9 Make me hear of joy and gladness,
that the body you have broken may rejoice.

10 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquities.

11 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

12 Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your holy Spirit from me.

13 Give me the joy of your saving help again
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

The Epistle
Hebrews 5:5-10

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;
as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The Gospel

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to John.
Glory to you Lord Christ.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Praise to you Lord Christ.

A Reflection

May the words written and the prayers of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Spring is out there. (Perhaps a bit hard to believe for some of the recent temperatures in the teens, but it is coming!) We had that one good day where we could open the windows a bit and get some fresh air into the house – so the promise is there.

It was enough of a promise that some of those advance thoughts of Spring have begun. My daughter has started some seedlings for planting – Basil – always a favorite from the garden. Gardening always strikes me as a remarkable act of faith. We plant things, unsure of what will happen, (too much sun, too much water, an unfamiliar crop, and risking the seeds getting eaten by birds). But we do it anyway!

Gardening or this act of planting change is also risky. Jesus reminds us of this in today's Gospel where we are offered, "Very truly, I tell you, 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." We don't plant the seed to keep everything as it is – we are seeking something new – we are looking for a change.

As a society, we are not, however, big on change. We are prone to resist change, even if "it is for our own good." I offer for your consideration, the notion of wearing a mask – Kim and I were verbally accosted at one point early on in the pandemic for wearing one. But that is an extreme example – even little changes can be a source of frustration in the day. What was your last frustrating moment regarding facing change?

"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." Or, in the change of death, it will bear much fruit. And no question, death is part of the inevitable cycle of life, or so we are taught.

Perhaps Jesus is offering dramatic foreshadowing again. In his death, he certainly bears much fruit! The seed of the Holy Spirit has gone on to take hold and bear fruit around the world – including in all of us.

But death is also change, maybe death is not just about the end of life. Jesus goes on to offer, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This is a bit of a riddle, I think. I believe when this speaks of those who love their life, it means those who love the life this world offers. In loving the temptations of this world, we are committing ourselves to a life we are destined to lose. But if we hate, (strong word), the life the world offers, we are then open to the gift Jesus offers – the gift of eternal life.

Shakespeare once said, "Cowards die many times before their death. The valiant never taste of death but once," (OK, he didn't actually say it, but wrote it for the play Julius Caesar.) Or is it was paraphrased centuries later by Ernest Hemingway in Farewell to Arms, "A coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave man dies but once."

Personally, I would actually revise both of these – it's not a coward who dies many times before their death – it's *everyone*. We have, unfortunately, all had those moments that feel like death. Life as you know it has ended. You can't imagine it going on, but it does – sometimes painfully and slowly.

But the converse of this is the recognition that we all know of resurrection, also. Those incredible moments where life returns in all its glory and beautiful majesty. We celebrate one of those

moments in just a few weeks when our teacher, the Lord returns from that place no one ever imagined he could.

This may be in a lot of ways the big bottom line of what it is to be a Christian. Do you believe death is the end, the final chapter, or do you know in your heart that death is a transition, and everyone dies a thousand times in the course of their life, and that we together as a people have the gift of eternal life?

We have free will, of course – the choice is ours. As we hear in today’s Psalm, let our prayer be, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” *Amen.*

Let us now confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Praying together:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Let us end by praying as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us – Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

The prayer of Spiritual Communion this week is from apartheid-era South Africa. In that time many prisoners were denied the sacraments and had to find other ways of taking Communion.

This found its way into the 1989 Anglican Church of Southern Africa Prayer Book as a help to others who could not receive.

Jesus, may all that is you flow into me. May your body and blood be my food and drink. May your passion and death be my strength and life. Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given. May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross. Let me not run from the love which you offer but hold me safe from the forces of evil. On each of my dyings shed your light and your love. Keep calling to me until that day comes when, with your saints, I may praise you forever. Amen.

Think about it this week – with the return of Spring, is our focus only on death, or can we begin to recognize the tell-tale signs of life eternal? Both are a needed part of the cycle of life – the resurrection in Spring and the death in the Fall – but where we focus is up to us – the choice is ours.

And remember Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those we travel with. So be swift to love – make haste to be kind – and now go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Yours in Christ,
Dave+

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