

A TIME TO WEEP AND MOURN: 5TH SUNDAY LENT B

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Just fifty years ago this year a song for peace called, *“Turn, turn, turn”* by Pete Seeger and sung by *The Byrds* became the number one hit of the Hit Parade. Its words are based entirely on Chapter 3 of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. It includes the line, *“A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance”*. Easter will be our time to laugh and our time to dance. But today our Church has brought us to a time of weeping and mourning in response to God’s word to us today about the sufferings of Jesus.

Our Second Reading recalls his agony in the Garden of Olives. There and then the prospect of his passion and death makes him cry out to God in fear and dread. Like any young man he doesn’t want to die. He wants to stay alive and to enjoy life to the max. But he knows that his enemies are already on their way to arrest him. By this time tomorrow he’ll surely be dead, strung up in disgrace on a rough cross outside the city walls. The thought of it all overwhelms him and though a grown man, reduces him to tears. And yet he does not run away or escape. He does not even think of doing that. He humbly accepts his destiny and submits to God’s plans for him to save and change the world.

Our gospel according to John, however, has a different angle on the attitude of Jesus to his fate. Even though the thought of it is truly troubling and upsetting, far from asking God the Father to save him from his doom, he actually welcomes it. For two reasons! In the first place, to give praise, honour and glory to God! In the second place, to attract the appreciation, respect and love of all human beings! This is what he means when he says, *“when I am lifted up from the earth [on my cross], I will draw all people to myself”*.

Jesus sees his forthcoming death from a third angle as well. It’s in his words, *“whoever serves me will follow me”*. He is saying that you and I and all his friends have to share in his sufferings and death.

Suffering comes in many forms and so does death. Death also means many little deaths before our time comes *“to face the final curtain”*.

There are hundreds of ways in which you and I have to die to ourselves, die to getting our own way, die to our own ease, pleasure and satisfaction. Probably more than any other group with us here today, you who are parents know the meaning of laying down your life for others, over and over again.

Raising your family – the sleepless nights, the feeds, the colds, the rashes, the nappy changes when your children are helpless babies. And the time, care, attention and skills you give them in their growing up years, are all ways you die to yourselves day after day. You do this for the outcomes you hope, expect, and work for. You do this so that your children will grow into adults who will live good, fruitful, useful and productive lives. The sacrifices you make are another application of what Jesus means with his image of a seed having to first die in the ground before it can spring up as a live and productive plant.

In later years the roles are often reversed. Now grown children are asked to be the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies. Aging and ailing parents require time, care and energy from their adult children, who are often still caring for their own children. Schedules are changed and plans are altered when, for example, an elderly parent requires an emergency trip to the doctor, has a fall at home, can't find their glasses, or starts losing their mind.

Being alive now means all kinds of ways we are invited and called to follow Jesus in his own sufferings and dying. The challenge which goes with our situations is this: Do we accept the sacrifices we are required to make? Do we accept them as he did, ie. willingly, cheerfully, generously, and lovingly? Or do we resent and hate what we have to do? Or worse, do we run away from our responsibilities?

It's not all pain, thank God! There's gain as well. The gain of becoming a better person, a more genuine and generous person! The gain too of closeness to Christ in our lives here and now, and the prospect of everlasting life with him in the hereafter! The slogans are simply true: *"No pain, no gain!" "No cross, no crown!"*

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