

Sunday, March 22, 2015

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

2nd Reading Hebrews 5:7-9

Responsorial: Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15

Gospel: John 12:20-33

Welcoming Others into the Church and the Family of God

Whoever serves me must follow me. (John 12:26)

You might wonder whether Jesus is giving the cold shoulder to these Greeks. They seem anxious to talk to him, but they can't seem to get a word in. Upon hearing that they want to see him, Jesus gives an enigmatic response: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12:24). What kind of an answer is that?

Actually, it's the right answer! These Gentile converts to Judaism have come to worship at the Passover feast, but Jesus is saying that their Passover will not happen until after his resurrection. He is the "grain of wheat" who will be a sacrifice for sin. His death was necessary so that he could produce "much fruit" in the form of salvation for everyone. No one will be excluded, not even these Gentiles!

Today we can celebrate the fact that we too were once outsiders but are now a part of the "in crowd." Most of the people reading these words are Gentiles, not a part of the chosen people with whom God first made his covenant. We "once were far off" but have been brought near to God "by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). We are his adopted children, and there is no better family to be part of.

A question to reflect on, then, is "How welcoming am I to those I may consider outsiders?" We all have some notion of who belongs in church and who doesn't: that old man who never seems to smile. That couple whose kids can't sit still at Mass. That young man who seems too "liberal" or that older woman who seems too "conservative." They are all part of our family. They have all been grafted into Christ along with us. May we treasure each of them just as much as Jesus treasures us!

"Thank you, Lord, for welcoming me into your family. Teach me how to be just as welcoming. May I exclude no one from receiving my attention, consideration, and friendship."

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. In the first reading, the Lord promises a new covenant that is much different than the old covenant. It will not be merely a set of external rules and commandments; it will now be written in our hearts. The promise is that we will not just know about him, but we will actually “know the Lord” in a personal and intimate way. Why is this now possible for us? What is the difference between a “knowing about” relationship with the Lord and a personal relationship of knowing him and experiencing his great love? How would you characterize your relationship with the Lord? How can you deepen this relationship?
2. The responsorial Psalm is King David's great prayer of repentance after he had committed serious sin. How does David's reaction, reflected in Psalm 51, compare to your reaction when faced with sin in your life?
3. In the second reading, we read that Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." What do these words mean to you and how do they apply to your own Christian walk? What is your reaction to suffering in your life? In what ways has it caused you to grow closer to Jesus and deepened your faith and dependence on him?
4. In the Gospel reading, Jesus continues to focus with increasing clarity on his coming passion and death, the "hour" when redemption will be accomplished by his obedience to his Father and the shedding of his blood. Jesus also says that: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me . . . The Father will honor whoever serves me.” Can you give an example from your life when serving and following Jesus caused persecution or suffering, but yet you were able to see God work a mighty “good” and produce “much fruit” in your or someone else's life? How were you able to maintain an inner peace, knowing you were following Jesus and his will for you?
5. In the Gospel reading, we also hear these words of Jesus: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” With Good Friday and Easter fast approaching, what additional steps can you take to fulfill these words of Jesus, and produce “much fruit” in the remaining days of Lent?
6. The meditation reminds us that “we too were once outsiders” to God's salvation, but now, through Jesus death and resurrection, we are now “adopted children” and part of his family. The meditation also challenges us to reflect on this question: “How welcoming am I to those I may consider outsiders?” How would you answer this question? It then goes on to say that “We all have some notion of who belongs in church and who doesn't.” In what ways do these words apply to you? What are some steps you can take to reach out to and welcome others who may think differently than you, but who need to hear that Jesus “treasures” them so much that he died on the Cross out of his great love for them?
7. Take some time now to pray and ask the Lord for a grateful heart for what he did for you on the Cross, and a more welcoming heart for those who are also in need of his great mercy. Use the prayer at the end of the meditation as the starting point.

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, a director of partner relations for **The Word Among Us Partners**, (<http://www.waupartners.org/>); a ministry of **The Word Among Us** (www.wau.org) to the military, prisoners, women with crisis pregnancies or who have had abortions, and college students. He is also a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Maurice was also the founding Executive Director of the **National Fellowship of Catholic Men**, for which he is currently a Trustee (<http://www.nfcmusa.org/>). He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]

As posted on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal National Service Committee's website: www.nsc-chariscenter.org