

'No pain of death, no gain of life'

NO PAIN, no gain. The simplest advice to the out-of-shape sums up the entire paschal mystery. Next Sunday's Gospel (John 12:20-33) includes Jesus' ominously self-conscious saying, "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." He turns the advice on himself: No pain, no gain.

This brief parable about the agricultural life cycle has helped many a faithful Christian through the loss of a loved one, the darkness of doubt, the fear of loneliness, and the anguish of failure. Christianity strengthens its own members and seduces potential candidates through its stalwart optimism in the face of unfathomable loss.

As the days demarcating the death and resurrection of Christ draw ever closer, the liturgy leads us more deeply into their meaning. Both chronologically and thematically, next Sunday's Gospel brings us closer to the cross. The story it tells unfolds in Jerusalem just after Jesus has entered to shouts of "Hosannah!" Its content deals with our salvation.

ONCE AGAIN, Jesus predicts his passion. The parable of the seed is not just about exercise, loss, or suffering. It's about death. Jesus' death. He is the seed who will die and enter the earth. He is the seed who will bear fruit. Jesus predicts more than his passion. He predicts his glory.

The full implication of his death and resurrection is slyly revealed by the arrival of the Greeks. Who are these Greeks who come to worship at the festival and want to see Jesus? They're Gentiles, not Jews. Yet they've come to Jerusalem for Passover. What's more, they're seeking out a famous rabbi through the help of his followers. Once again, John is introducing us to someone who seeks faith. The search for belief which runs throughout the Gospel recurs here near the end.

The arrival of the Greeks shows us how widely the message of Jesus can spread. As Jesus makes his final entry into Jerusalem, the Pharisees realize

there is nothing they can do. In the verse which precedes next Sunday's Gospel, they say to one another, "Look, the world has gone after him!" Then, their prophecy comes true! Greeks appear seeking Jesus. Greeks, whom you don't expect at the Jewish Passover — these Gentiles say to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Jesus responds to their presence with a pronouncement about his passion. He does not sugar-coat his message for new recruits. Instead, they must face the hard reality of suffering and death — if they are to appreciate the glory of the resurrection. The gain of discipleship comes only with pain.

JESUS BEGINS his response with a solemn statement: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." All throughout John's Gospel we have been told; "the hour is not yet at hand." From the wedding at Cana (2:4) through his conversations in ministry (7:6, 8, 30; 8:20) Jesus has told his disciples "Not yet, not yet." Until now. Now the hour has come. He says it twice next Sunday. And once again in 17:1 at the Last Supper. The hour has come. In that hour the Son will be glorified so that he may give glory to God. That hour brings not just passion; it brings glory.

The arrival of that hour affects the believing community. As Jesus will lose his life to attain glory, so his followers must also be prepared to suffer loss. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." We must follow where Jesus has led, but he promises his presence to his servants. We never suffer alone. Discipleship does not just mean conforming our preferences to Christ; it means accepting suffering, persecution, and death. Not as an end in themselves, but as a means toward glory. No, as THE means toward glory.

This passion prediction tells not just what will happen to Jesus, but what will happen to us. "And I," Jesus says, "When I am lifted up from earth," on the cross, through the grave, into the heavens, "I will draw all people to myself." The kind of death that Jesus suffers is not just lifting up, it's drawing in. We will be drawn in, lifted up in derision, and lifted up for exaltation.

Whatever we suffer this Lent — failure, illness, brokenness, unfairness — it's only seed. □

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Fr. Paul Turner



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Daily Scripture Readings

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 9

2 Chronicles 36:14-17, 19-23

Psalms 137:1-6

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

Monday, March 10

Isaiah 65:17-21

Psalms 30:2, 4-6, 11-13

John 4:43-54

Tuesday, March 11

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12

Psalms 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9

John 5:1-16

Wednesday, March 12

Isaiah 49:8-15

Psalms 145:8-9, 13-14, 17-18

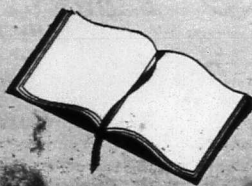
John 5:17-30

Thursday, March 13

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalms 106:19-23

John 5:31-47



Friday, March 14

Wisdom 2:1a, 12-22

Psalms 34:17-21, 23

John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Saturday, March 15

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalms 7:2-3, 9-12

John 7:40-53

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 16

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 51:3-4, 12-15

Hebrews 5:7-9

John 12:20-33