

Fifth Sunday of Lent

There are good reasons to believe that the Gospel of John, from which we have just read, was written in Ephesus, 70 years after Jesus' death. I like to think about the context in which the Scriptures were written, not just because it helps me understand some things in the text, but also to appreciate that our Scriptures were inspired by the experience of a flesh and blood community.

Ephesus was a center of learning, trade, government, and religion in the ancient world. We also know that the early Christians were greatly persecuted and martyred there. The early church was filled with stories of betrayal, torture, death, and heroic witness to the faith. The stakes for believing in Jesus were very high. And it was the heroic witness of these martyrs that eventually led to the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity. It should come as no surprise to us then that John's Gospel should have a special focus on sharing in the sufferings of Jesus and the glory to come.

The words of Jesus in today's Gospel must have been very important to a community that was awash with the blood of their fellow believers. Our foremothers and forefathers in the faith counted themselves blessed to die as Jesus died, alive in the faith of God's love for the world. Just imagine how that community of martyrs first heard these words, "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."

By comparison we have it easy today, but martyrdom comes to all believers in different ways. In the broadest sense a martyr is one who is prepared to pay the price for holding true to Christ. For us now this might mean making serious choices about the company we keep, the business ventures we enter into, the non-violent protests we mount, foregoing luxuries so that others in our world might have necessities, and even remaining faithful to the vows and promises we have made. Christian faith sometimes bites hard, and when it does we know we are sharing in the martyr's lot.

And what should be our response when our faith in Christ costs us something big? Jesus models it for us in today's Gospel, "...what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour.' No, it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

May this final week of Lent, then, see this flesh and blood community be like our forebears in Ephesus and actively seek out ways of sharing in the martyr's lot by letting go of what is not essential and focusing on the One who loved us to the end.

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