

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

Homily at St. Theresa of the Little Child in Meeteetse and Our Lady of the Valley in Clark

Deacon Joe

During his public ministry, Jesus had made it clear that one condition for being his follower was bearing the cross. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me" (Luke 9:23). As his passion draws near, he energetically reiterates this same condition: "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."

To be a Christian is to be where Christ is: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be." And where is Christ? He is always pouring out his life for others on the cross, giving himself for the good of others through self-forgetful love. This is the lesson of the Gospels, and of the Eucharist - the extension throughout history of Christ's self-sacrifice on Calvary.

And so, that's also where we should be: giving our lives for God and our neighbors. Christ's great commandment was to love others as he has loved us. He taught this lesson by example on the cross, and with words during the Last Supper: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). St Paul learned this lesson well; he was always talking about the cross. He wrote to the Corinthians: "...the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

As followers of Christ, we should expect crosses, difficulties, and even, at times, persecution. To be a true Christian involves not just wearing a crucifix or hanging one on the wall, but bearing the sign of the cross in the very marrow of our lives. We all really need to experience this love of Christ; otherwise the demands of our Christian life will wear us down. If we don't discover that everything God asks of us comes from his love for us, we will just see them as meaningless duties.

But once we encounter the face of Christ smiling at us, the goodness of God shining upon us, then these duties turn into an exciting adventure. That's the experience of all the saints, even those who underwent excruciating martyrdom. Some of us will never suffer martyrdom by death but we will suffer martyrdom by everyday living.

- (Story of Father Larry - Benedictine Missionary Priest)

It is not really difficult to follow Christ and obey his commandments and teachings, if we really love him. But we can't really love him if we don't allow ourselves to experience how much he loves us.

Whether or not we believe in Christ, we will still have to bear crosses. Life in a fallen world is full of crosses, no matter what. No one is an exception when it comes to suffering and struggling in life. But as Catholics, members of Christ's mystical body, we find meaning in these crosses, because we don't have to carry them alone - Christ bears them with us.

We are the lucky ones, because we know that. But what about the people who don't know it? In our Lenten Season we are called to pray more deeply, fast more intentionally and one of the most

important activities we can engage in is almsgiving - helping those in need. And one critical - and beautiful - way to do this is by helping others find meaning in their crosses.

We all know people who are suffering. They may be suffering economically - their marriage and family life stressed by financial pressures beyond their control. They may be suffering physically - their body and mind weakened or ravaged by disease, injury, or old age. They may be suffering emotionally - working through an experience of betrayal, infidelity, or loss. They may be suffering and wondering why they are on the planet and where they can find a reason for living.

As Catholics, we experience those same forms of suffering, but we know what to do with them. We bring them to Christ; we grip our crucifixes; we offer them to the Father for the salvation of souls and the reparation of sins.

In the few remaining weeks of Lent, let's reach out and help lighten someone else's cross, just as Christ constantly helps lighten ours. Let's show and tell someone else about the one Cross that transforms all other crosses. Who knows, maybe by sharing the good news of God's love with others, we will come to live it more deeply ourselves.