

5th SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR B

Life begins in loss. In the act of birth we were pushed out from the warm womb of our mother, then dragged helpless into the big world of watching adults. Disconnected from our mother, we may have been given a whack to get us breathing. Some welcome ! Our new separateness was frightening. Even though we were returned to our mother, we inhabited a space that was different from hers. To gain a place in the new world, we first had to lose our place in the old one. The act of birth is inseparable from the pain of letting go. That was our first education.

When we think of loss we usually have in mind the loss of some loved one in death. But the experience of loss plays a larger part in our lives than we might think: we lose not only by someone's death, but by leaving and being left, by letting go and moving on, by relinquishing our false dreams. Throughout our lives we have to face a whole series of *necessary losses*, people and relationships and attachments we have to give up if we are to grow. It is only through losses that we learn to change and adapt and make new gains. No pain, no gain.

As we grow older we have to let go of our youthful good health, our perfect vision, our waistlines, our earnestness to save the world, our unreal expectations of others and so on... The time comes when we have to let go of life itself, and that final acct can be as painful a leave-taking as the act of birth. But in the midst of this litany of loss there can be new growth and new life. As Jesus says in today's Gospel:

Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit.

Jesus' death is ahead of him. The hour has come. The pilgrims are arriving in Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, including some Greek converts who want to see Jesus. At this Passover feast the sacrificial lamb will be Jesus himself. Now the time has come for Jesus when there is no more time. He must face the loss of freedom, the loss of friends, the loss of support, and the loss of his own life. Not surprisingly, all this loss troubles him.

The other three Gospels speak of Jesus' agony on the Mount of Olives, how Jesus anguished over his approaching death, hoping and praying that it might be the Father's will to avoid the violent consequences of the mission. In John's Gospel there is no agony scene. Jesus is troubled, but he rejects the

temptation to ask the Father to save him from what is to come: *“What shall I say: Father, save me from this hour ? But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name”*. In this portrayal Jesus is aware that the pain and the loss cannot be avoided if the Father’s name is to be glorified. There is going to be gain from the pain; there is going to be glory from the way of the cross.

For Jesus to imagine that his suffering is avoidable is a false hope that has to be relinquished. The losing of his life is a necessary loss.

The way of the cross, which appeared as a possibility at the beginning of the ministry, now presents itself as inevitable. The hour has come. His decision is to go through the humiliation and the agony of the cross, and be put to death. This, as John admits, does not mean that Jesus is untroubled about what is ahead. The pain will still be acute; the loss will still be crushing. But the Father’s solidarity with his Son will keep Jesus going to the end. Only that gives point to it all.

Jesus’ loss is our gain. His radical act of self-forgetfulness stands at the centre of the Christian story. He is the grain of wheat that died in order to bear much fruit. That is why the cross has such a position of prominence wherever Christians gather. The great loss of Jesus’ life – *and the loss was great* – has become in time the ground of our hope. It points us beyond the reality of suffering to the reality of Easter.

In the midst of our own loss, however, it is difficult to imagine what good can emerge from the pain. Sometimes the pain can reduce us to silence, so that we become dumb witnesses preoccupied with our own affliction. Few of us can see any point to pain at the time. The Christian community needed time to make sense of the death of Jesus, they needed help to see that their immense loss was more than a terrible accident. We too need time and help. Only then can we look back, as the Gospel does, and cherish what good has emerged from the loss.