

## Homily: Fifth Sunday of Lent 2021

This weekend, in the northern hemisphere, we mark the spring equinox. New life will soon be appearing around us, with all its variety, colour and beauty. Many keen gardeners will be planting seeds around now, and will eagerly anticipate their growth. Farmers too will be planting for a harvest which they won't reap until the autumn. It's such a natural part of the cycle of our lives, something so familiar to us; and, as He so often does, Jesus uses this familiarity to teach us about a mystery we can only begin to understand.

"Unless a wheat grain falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." Jesus employs this image, almost like a parable, to describe His death and resurrection. He is the wheat grain which will fall to ground and die; He will be buried, but He will rise again and yield a rich harvest. When a seed is buried, it doesn't return to the surface just as a seed; it returns bringing new life, a life almost unrecognisable from what it was. In the same way, when Jesus rises from the dead, He won't simply return to His old life – He will return bringing a new, glorious and eternal life. And the abundant harvest is all those who will share in that life – in other words, it's us.

Jesus speaks these words in response to a request from some visitors, some "Greeks", who have come to Jerusalem for the festival. They are not Jews; they are Gentiles, non-Jews, but they want to see Jesus. Like the wise men who came from the East when Jesus was born, these Greeks are a sign that Gentiles too will share in the gifts of God; we too can receive salvation from the Lord. And so Jesus says, "Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified". He is going to die and rise again, and the harvest will be gathered in. And we are part of that harvest. We have faith only because Jesus died and rose again. Without that, we'd never have heard the Gospel. We are the "Greeks", so to speak, who are about to come and worship at the festival of Jesus' death and resurrection; we are the "Greeks" who want to see Jesus, to know Him and to receive from Him.

The harvest, of course, comes at a cost for Jesus. He must give His life so that we may be gathered to Him. Jesus experiences fear: "Now my soul is troubled", He says. "What shall I say: Father, save me from this hour?" Shall I pray that this won't happen to me? "But it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour." These words remind us of the agony in the garden; Jesus is troubled and afraid, but accepts the Father's will and chooses to go to His death for our salvation. Today's second reading also points us to Gethsemane, saying that Christ "offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the One who had the power to save Him out of death." And as a result, we are told, "His prayer was heard..." and "He became to all who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." He became the seed, the source, of a rich harvest.

Jesus' life is all about self-giving, it's all about love. Our lives, as we know to our cost, often fall way short of this. Time and again we fall back into the same old attempts at self-preservation, looking after ourselves first and sometimes being slow to give to others or to serve them. But when we do give, when we serve, when we love, it brings us so much more joy than the times we behave in ways that are selfish or self-serving. We're fallen beings,

and we learn so slowly what's really good for us. But Jesus takes up the cross to show us: give, and greater things will be given to you. This is what He teaches us today: "Wherever I am, my servant will be there too." We must follow the path of the cross with Him: a path which is not concerned for looking after ourselves so much as living for love. When we give out of love, we die to ourselves, and an abundant new life springs up in us.

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself", the Lord tells us today. To draw us to Him: this is an act of love. What else could it be? We only try to draw people towards us if we love them. His cross is the undeniable expression of love, the final proof of His love for us. If that doesn't draw us, what will? It's by this perfect act of love that Jesus pulls on our hearts, and in this same moment that He is the wheat grain buried, planted in the earth. The seed of love is planted; the harvest of love will be truly great. In only a few days' time we will enter into this mystery in the celebrations of Holy Week. We will not be mere observers; we will not be an audience. We will be the people who are drawn to the cross by the Lord's love, drawn into the mystery, called to follow in the Master's ways by lives of self-giving love, so that we too may die to ourselves and yield a rich harvest of love.

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