

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Great Lent

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Sunday, April 14, 2019

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Great Lent. Less than two weeks separate us from the crucifixion and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and His Holy Resurrection.

The Gospel reading we just heard is a very important one, not only for what it tells us but also for what is coming, and how we humans really are.

Today, the Saviour is telling his disciples exactly what is going to happen in the next two weeks. He is telling them of His coming crucifixion, His death and His Resurrection from the dead. By doing this, He is preparing them for these events.

In a fortnight's time, we will be hearing how the disciples, when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, could not comprehend this, did not expect this, did not know what was happening, and above all how they were struggling to believe this. We all understand that the resurrection was an unheard concept for them.

However, our Lord had told them before about this, and He Himself had prepared them for what was about to happen. Yet, their fallen, human experience was preventing them from comprehending this.

They only started comprehending these events, when in the end they encountered Jesus Christ our Saviour face-to-face, after his Resurrection from the dead.

Even then they still did not comprehend what had happened, but at least they were starting to make steps in the right direction. For the remainder of their lives they would be living out the implications of this Resurrection.

Two of the Apostles, James and John, asked the Saviour if they could sit, one on His right, and the other on His left, when He returned in glory. He responded that instead they would have to be baptised with the baptism with which He would be baptised and drink the cup that He would drink.

When they said that they would be able to do this, they did not really know nor understand what they were saying. But, nevertheless, it came to be.

He said that He, the Saviour, the Son of God, did not come to be served. He came to serve. This is the way in which the Apostles grew up after the Resurrection. They grew up as servants of Jesus Christ, serving together with Him.

To serve, that is the way of Christ: to be the servant of all. This service, being a servant, has nothing to do with being a slave. It is something that should be done out of love, and not out of fear. Because, as a Christian one should not do anything out of fear.

We Christians serve. We serve Christ. We serve each other. We serve strangers. We serve the needy, the unwanted and the unloved. We serve whomever the Lord gives us to serve.

Why? Because we love Jesus Christ. His love pushes us into spending our daily lives as servants, as people serving Christ and others. It is, or at least it should be, a second nature for a Christian, to serve, to try to be of service.

Also, when the clergy celebrate the Divine Liturgy, this becomes a service of others for Christ's sake, where the clergy bring those they serve back to the Liturgy on their prayers. In that way Liturgy and Life are all one.

To many, many people living in the modern world, all this, must sound alien to them. Like something that does not apply to them.

We all read newspapers, watch television and use social media, or at least one of these. What do we read and see?

Everything seems to revolve about oneself, how to improve oneself, how to be better... especially, how to be better than others. Everything is about instant self-gratification, self-love, greed and power. People want to have everything, right now, be comfortable, without having to make too much effort to achieve this.

That is not the way of Christ. The way of Christ is all about love. Not love of oneself, but love of the other. It is all about hope. It is all about life, about life-giving. It is all about service, about the service that we give, in Christ, for Christ, in and with each other.

And yes, we sometimes get tired and fed-up because we get overworked and everything seems to be getting too much for us. But let us not forget one thing: the most important and fundamental element is that we must love Jesus Christ.

We need to be in love with Jesus Christ, and with this love we need to feel the want to serve. We must look for every occasion to serve, to be helpful, to encourage and to strengthen people around us.

It is that sort of love that can bring us peace. A peace greater than we could ever encounter anywhere else. Except maybe here in the temple of the Lord, in the company of other likeminded parishioners. And at times this peace, this joy will be overwhelming. This is what we are all supposed to try and achieve.

There is no need to panic, and do not despair. If this has not happened to you yet, there is still time for all of us to take steps in that direction and achieve this peace, this joy.

Today we also commemorate Saint Mary of Egypt. Saint Mary of Egypt is such a great example for us when it comes to help us understand the meaning of repentance.

What is the meaning of repentance? Repentance simply means to turn away in the opposite direction: turning away from the darkness and turning to the light; turning away from death and turning to life; turning away from selfishness and turning to love.

Saint Mary of Egypt, when we read about her life, lived an extremely broken, wretched and debauched life in which she delighted in pulling people down with her into despair.

Yet her heart was searching. When she was confronted by the Lord's love in Jerusalem, in the Church of the Resurrection, she did, in fact, turn away completely.

Then she gave herself up one hundred per cent in order to serve Jesus Christ, in love with Him, so much so that she withdrew into the desert. She was not seen or heard of for many, many years, until Saint Zosimas came along to prepare her for her death.

All of these things are done, and accomplished by the Lord's love. The Lord prepares us all, for the moments of repentance in our lives, just like he did with Saint Mary of Egypt. He prepares us for great blessings. He is always there, going ahead before us, ready to meet us with His life-giving love.

I can hear you ask now: And what do we need to do? We need to be prepared to accept that life-giving love when He presents Himself to us, and, like Saint Mary of Egypt, to turn away from our self-serving ways to serving Him in everyone, to turn away from loving ourselves, and only ourselves and to love Jesus Christ.

Nothing else matters. We must become our real selves in the context of loving Him. Saint Maximus the Confessor said: "If God is love, he who has love, has God within himself".

As I mentioned earlier, we have two more weeks in which to concentrate ourselves in prayer, in abstaining from eating too much (and those things we should not be eating), and concentrating ourselves on serving Him, and caring for other people.

Let us ask the Lord to give us this Grace in the last days of Great Lent, so that when we come to the end of Great Lent, and are celebrating the joy of Pascha, we will be able to face the Resurrection with joy and love.

The Lord prepares us for this in the same way that He prepared the Apostles for the Resurrection. We will be able to live in the Resurrection during the days after the Resurrection.

Through this abstinence, and through the Resurrection, our lives will be straightened to serve Him better in the coming year with more love, more focus, with deeper service, with deeper joy, glorifying Him together with His Father, who is everlasting, and His all-holy, good, and Life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.

Amen.