

29th March 2026

Fifth Sunday of Great Lent

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1] You will, doubtless, have heard the saying, *don't try to run before you can walk*. We might think that zeal, enthusiasm, earnestness, and an ambition to get on and succeed, are good things. But, as they say, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. We might rightly be cautious over younger, inexperienced people gaining positions of power and influence before they have full knowledge and are competent in all circumstances.

2] So we had in that gospel incident today, two of Christ's disciples, the sons of Zebedee, making a request that they should be given seats of authority when the kingdom of Christ comes in glory. These two young men, James and John, caught up with the ardour of faith, having found the Messiah, suddenly conceive the notion that *they* are able to ascend thrones, one on the right and one on the left of the Lord.

3] *'To sit at My right hand or at My left,'* Our Lord replies. *'Is not Mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'* For whom prepared? Well, we who have attended the Akathist through the Fridays of Great Lent, certainly know for whom the right hand seat of Christ was prepared ~ She who, by grace, became herself the seat of the King of All: *'Rejoice! For thou art the Throne of the King: Rejoice! For thou holdest Him Who upholds all.'*

4] But James and John had not yet even walked down that same road; they were yet to be purified, illumined and refined in the Holy Spirit. But they would do, Our Lord warns them. *'You do not know what you are asking... The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised.'* Yet even then, the Lord God already has His purposes set for the salvation of us all, as we learned in last week's reading from the epistle to the Hebrews.

5] Listen to this petition from St Paul, writing to the Philippians. *'That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.'* [Phil 3;10-11]

6] *'The fellowship of His sufferings:'* That is what he seeks in order to achieve his aim. And we were told the same on the third Sunday, to take up our cross and follow Him. This is the authentic path of true Christianity; this is the way of Orthodoxy. And as the other disciples begin to be indignant with the two brothers ~ as if they knew better ~ Christ informs them all that the Christian way, the ascetic way, involves, as well, service in humility: *'Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be servant of all.'*

7] If we learn nothing else this Great Lent, let us settle on this, that our way to the glory of resurrection is along the very same road that Christ undertook; it is through

our suffering. Nothing in the Christian faith promises us a perfect life here, on earth; one that is free from pain. We have no claim on God, here, for prosperity, wealth, security, success. No one in this biological life, in this social life, in this political life, will escape suffering; this *is* the human condition!

8] Let call to mind the martyrs of the Church; those who participated, literally, in the sufferings of Christ's crucifixion, like those whom we commemorate today, the hieromartyr Mark, bishop of Arethusa, and Cyril the deacon of Heliopolis, who both suffered under Julian the Apostate. And, of course, there are those who struggled in the ascetic life; a way of life taken up after the early persecutions of the Church had ended when St Constantine the Great came to the throne of the Empire. Today, the fifth Sunday of the Fast, we celebrate St Mary of Egypt, whose astounding story most of you will know, I am sure.

9] But then there is the martyrdom ~ the *witness*, to translate that word from the Greek ~ of our own Christian lives before the world: the martyrdom of a stable marriage, a sanctified icon of Christ and His bride, the Church, bearing fruit in children brought up in the Lord; the martyrdom of widowhood, bearing fruit in prayer and intercessions, and hospitality towards God's holy ones; the martyrdom of a chaste life until marriage, bearing fruit in purity, standing against the mores of these times. And finally, the witness we shall

all bear in the decline of the flesh and our natural sufferings.

10] The Orthodox monk and writer, Fr Seraphim Rose, whom many of you will have read, once wrote that we learn more of God through our pain, than in pleasures and worldly happiness. He says, *'Very simply... pleasure and happiness accustom one to satisfaction to the things given in this world, where as pain and suffering drive one to seek a more profound happiness beyond the limitations of this world. I am,'* he continues. *'At this moment in some pain.'* He was suffering from the cancer that would end his life. *'And I call on the Name of Jesus ~ not necessarily to relieve the pain, but that Jesus in Whom alone we may transcend this world, may be with me during it, and His will be done in me.... And why is a philosophy of pleasure untenable?'* He goes on. *'Because pleasure is impermanent and unreliable, and pain is inevitable.'*

11] An old English proverb had this summed up perfectly from the other side, in a little verse that has come down to us from the Middle Ages: *When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be, but when the devil was well, the very devil was he!*

12] In the Garden of Gethsemane, St Matthew tells us that before His arrest, Our Lord had prayed, *'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'* [Matt 26:39] So, what of us, who dare to approach the Cup of the Lord today?

He addresses us today, as well as His first disciples: *'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised.'*

13] Having been baptised into Christ's death, we continue on our journey through this life, intensified as they must be during these days of Lent. And, as ever, we take grace for the journey from the sacred chalice; by the Holy gifts we take, establish and refresh the New Life of the kingdom of God within us. But that cup is also the one He accepted in Gethsemane, and His baptism through the cross was our baptism as well. And when we, the faithful, come on Holy and Great Wednesday to be anointed, it is that our own sufferings may be consecrated. For any healing in this world is only temporary, and whatever their final outcome, the way out is always to pass through with that same prayer of His on our lips, *'Yet not as I will, but as you will.'* Or as we might say, elsewhere, *Thy kingdom come, will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.*