

Homily for March 18, 5th Sunday in Lent

In the movie, “Romero”, which we will be showing here on Monday evening, there is a very powerful scene where Oscar Romero visits the grave of one of his priest friends, killed by an oppressive and corrupt government in El Salvador, where Romero is archbishop. He has been wrestling with others and with himself about what he should do or say publicly about the violence, not wanting to make things worse, not wanting to risk his own life yet knowing that conditions are deteriorating quickly. He kneels down a short distance from the grave and, looking upward, almost in a trance, he says, “I can’t.” Bowing, he whispers, “You must.” And, looking up, he says, “I will.” Blessed Romero had a conversion and commitment experience at that moment that filled him with a new voice for the people and for the gospel. “I can’t.” “You must.” “I will.”

In John’s telling, it is what Jesus faces: *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be gloried”* (read, “crucified”) ... *“I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”* Save me? No, glorify You. Jesus is the model for true obedience, not groveling at a command but sacrificing everything for the greatest good. The Letter to the Hebrews puts it, *“he learned obedience from what he suffered”* becoming *“the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”* Jesus suffered through what he saw and how he loved the people. Blessed Oscar Romero, soon to be saint, learned obedience by the same type of suffering, seeing the pain and suffering of others and loving them past his own reluctance and fear to a place of total self-sacrifice.

“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.” And the new covenant we hear about in Jeremiah instills in us the ability for such self sacrifice. For it was no longer a covenant written on stone tablets but on the very hearts of the people, giving us, naturally, the knowledge of and inclination toward God. It is what made the people become disciples of Jesus, not so much the miracles, but what was already written on their hearts that he awakened.

In the gospel we are told that the people were gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Just before this passage Jesus enters into Jerusalem celebrated by throngs of people (the Palm Sunday we’ll celebrate next week) and the Pharisees say to one another, *“You see that you are gaining nothing.*

The whole world has gone after him.” They, the people, the “whole world” are following their hearts. Our ultimate destination is death to ourselves, our own way, so that we might know life anew in Christ. “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies”, that is, is buried, “it remains just a grain of wheat.”

Notre Dame Sister Melanie Svoboda rather fancifully writes about the grain as having human traits – first proud of its golden nature, then becoming afraid as it gets thrown into the ground and is buried. It says: “I sat in total darkness. Afraid. Then I felt something ... water ... I began to lose my golden color, my smooth exterior became wrinkly ... over time I started to split asunder. I’m dying ... Then something amazing happened. Out of my shriveled, broken, dying self, two shoots emerged. One began pushing upward, the other downward – both powered by a force within and beyond me. As my root went down, my shoot went up until it broke through the soil into the brightness of the sun. I was no longer a grain of wheat – but something better.” And so, Sr. Melanie says: “Trust the Farmer. Befriend silence and darkness. Embrace transformation. Willingly relinquish your intactness. Believe. For the Ending is really the Beginning.” And Jesus says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”