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The Fifth Sunday of Lent (B)

Today's Gospel is one dear to my heart, for in it I see the pattern of my own life. It has been so central to my spiritual growth over the years that I have already chosen it to be proclaimed at my funeral.

Central to this passage are these words of Jesus: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it does die it produces much fruit" (John 12:24).

The Lord speaks first of all of himself; he is the true grain of wheat who dies to produce much fruit, the eternal life of grace. Freely and willingly he gave his life for us; he accepted our sufferings as his own and carried them to the Cross. Throughout his earthly ministry, "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8-9).

To say that he became perfect is to say he fulfilled his mission; this he did through his death and resurrection. It is from the Cross that his words continually echo in every time and place: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be" (John 12:26). If we desire to be with

the Lord we must follow him; and whoever follows must be his servant, so that he might be called, in the end, his friend (cf. John 15:15).

Therefore, whoever wishes to be with Jesus must follow him to the Cross, and through the Cross. In a word, a Christian must be willing to suffer. This is, in effect, the response Jesus gives to those who said to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21).

Is this not the desire of every heart, to see Jesus, to see him who is the fulfillment of our every desire? Yes, to see Jesus is the deepest longing of the human heart, whether implicit or explicit.

The Lord knows this - he has placed it with us - and so he says, "All, from least to greatest, shall know me... for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). This he accomplished on his Cross.

In the second place, Jesus speaks these words - unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies - to you and I, to everyone who would follow him. He calls each of us to become that grain and die to our selfish ambitions, desires and sin that we might produce much fruit, both in our lives and in the lives of others. He calls us to unite our sufferings with to his for the salvation of the world.

This is what we call redemptive suffering, a suffering that benefits others, a suffering that is not suffered in vain. This is what gives suffering its beauty, its power and its grace.

Whenever we say, "We wish to see Jesus," the Lord responds as he did in the Gospel passage: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). It is as though he says, "The time has come for you to see my Cross. If you wish to see me you must look to my Cross; if you wish to see me look to your sufferings. In these you will see me and know my glory."

Some of you know that I celebrated a birthday last week; I am now thirty-one years old. It seems to me that as we grow older we tend to use our birthdays to reflect on the trajectory of our lives.

Looking back over the years, many of us see our lives as though they were marked by certain pivotal moments that shaped and defined us, and marked the path on which our lives would progress. Some of these pivotal moments are joyous and others are heartbreaking.

As I look back over my life some of these such joyous moments include the day I receive my acceptance letter to the seminary; my first pilgrimage to the city of Saint Francis; and my visit to the grave of Blessed Damien of Molokai.

But as I consider these I cannot help but notice that most of the pivotal moments in life have been marked by a great

sadness. I think of the circumstances of my birth; I was not expected to live long. I think of the death of my father and then my mother. I think of my struggle with arthritis.

Time after time I offered, with Jesus, "prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears" to the Father (Hebrews 5:7). The trajectory of my life has been repeatedly with great suffering and sadness.

I do not say this to evoke pity or to draw attention to myself; I say this, rather, to state with great confidence that we do see Jesus in our sufferings; we do see him when we look to his Cross. And when we unite our sufferings with his we do indeed see his glory. There is hope even in the midst of great suffering!

Thinking back to the Gospel passage, so many in the crowd did not recognize the voice of the Father but thought it was thunder (cf. John 12:29). I tell you, they did not see the truth because they remained in the crowd, on the outside; they refused to enter into the mystery of Jesus Christ.

The same is true with us. If we wish to remain bystanders only to suffering and the Cross we will not see Jesus. But if we enter into our suffering, if we embrace it, then we will see Jesus when we bring our suffering and pain to his Cross.

In the Cross of Jesus Christ we see the perfect model of obedience. If we follow this example of loving obedience - of

humility, trust and faith - we, too, will be glorified in him.
Let each of us, then, look to his Cross, that we might know the
fullness of his glory, the splendor of his joy and peace. Amen.