

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Jer 31:31-34

Heb 5:7-9

Jn 12:20-33

There is a true story of an Indian Christian named Sundar Singh. He was brought up in the Sikh religion but later embraced Christianity. He lived close to the Himalayan Mountains. One cold winter day, he was traveling by foot with a Buddhist monk to a monastery that was about a four-hour walk. After two hours of walking there was a snow storm. It became dark and cold. The journey became dangerous, and they were afraid they were not going to make it. As they walked through the rocks, they heard someone calling out for help. They found another traveler who had fallen and broken his leg. The Buddhist monk told Sundar, “Do not stop. God has brought this man to his fate. He must work it out himself. That is what our faith teaches. We must hurry on before we die.” Sundar said, “It is my faith that God brought me here to help my brother. I cannot abandon him.” So he stayed to help the injured man while the monk hurried on. He bandaged the man’s broken leg, carried him on his back, and continued his journey to the monastery. When he had reached the vicinity of the monastery, he stumbled over something. He looked down at it and found that it was the body of the monk who accompanied him and who now had frozen to death. As he brushed the snow away from the monk’s body, he remembered the words of Jesus in the gospel of today, “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, and anyone who wishes to lose his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”

There are people in every society who are willing to give their lives for what they believe—for causes that are good or bad, noble or ignoble. There are people who risk their lives to protect and preserve the lives of others. Firefighters—they risk their lives each time they venture into a burning building to save someone. Those in the armed forces risk their lives to protect our safety and freedom. Police officers never know when their lives will be in danger in their effort to uphold the law. Medical personnel who treat patients with contagious diseases risk their own lives.

God gave us life to spend it for the right things and not to keep it in ease and comfort for ourselves. When we spend our life for God and others we are winning life all the time. It is better to burn out than rust out. New life is possible only by the death of the self through suffering and service. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it cannot grow and produce fruits. Salt delivers its taste by dissolving in water. A candle loses itself to give light. Mother Teresa spent her life for the poorest of the poor in the streets of Calcutta. The whole world admires her but how many are prepared to do what she did.

Telemachus was a monk who lived in the Fourth Century. He left the world to live all alone in the desert in prayer, meditation, and fasting to save his soul. He sought nothing but contact with God. Years later it dawned on him that his life was based on a selfish love for God. It came to him that if he was to serve God, he must serve his fellow brothers and sisters. If so, the desert was no place to live but in cities which were full of sin. So he set out to the largest city of the world at that time—Rome. By this time, Rome was officially Christian. So Christians were no longer thrown to the lions, but there was still the arena with the gladiator games. Those captured in war had to fight and kill each other to make a Roman holiday for the people. Telemachus found his way to the arena. There were 80,000 people. The chariot races ended and gladiators prepared to fight. Telemachus was appalled as gladiators fought; men for whom Christ had died were killing each other to amuse an allegedly Christian population. So the monk jumped the barrier and stood between the gladiators in his monk's habit. The gladiators stopped for a moment and pushed the monk aside. But he came in between again. The crowd began to hurl stones. They shouted to kill him and get him out of the way. The commander of the game gave the order. The gladiator's sword flashed and Telemachus was dead. The crowd became silent. They were shocked that a holy man was killed. There was a mass realization of what this killing was. The game ended abruptly that day and was never played again. By losing his life, Telemachus saved the lives of many.

It is by giving that we receive. It is by giving up that we gain. Once a woman told the pastor, "I love and admire priests. But I could never encourage my son to be a priest. He would have to give up entirely too much. I want him to have things his father and I never had." We would rather keep our lives—our comforts, than to give up or spend our lives loving God. Loving God is a way we live and not a rule we follow. Our challenge this week is to die to our ego, pride, selfishness, arrogance, inclinations, and habits that are undesirable and rise to a new life. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it produces no fruits.