

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

'And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking.'

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At the age of eighty-seven, in the second century AD, a bishop named Polycarp, of the city of Smyrna, was visited in his home by two Roman soldiers. They commanded Polycarp to follow them. He did not ask why. He did not ask of what he was accused. He need not ask, for he knew that there was only one crime of which he could be accused of by the world.

He asked the Roman soldiers for a moment to pray; and these were the words of his lips:

'I bless you, Lord, because you have deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of your martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life of soul and body, in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in your presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as you have prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, O You who are the true God, without any falsehood.'

The execution of St. Polycarp was at hand. His witness to the truth of his faith had begun.

The sons of Zebedee had seen and heard of many things concerning Jesus, whom they had followed. He had harrowed Satan and cast out demons. He had calmed the storm and directed nature. He had healed the broken and restored the sick. He had multiplied bread and fish, and fed thousands.

He had won over many Jews, and gained many gentiles to follow in his train. He had given hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind.

He had taught as one with authority; with a voice of command and authority not heard since divine thunder broke out from the heights of Mount Sinai.

And, if this were not enough, he had revealed Himself in the power and dread of his Transfiguration, filling his disciples with *fear and trembling*, even as Moses stood with great terror before the cloud of fire in the desert of the Exodus

The sons of Zebedee believed in Christ, and surely it was reasonable, considering all they had seen, for them to believe that the Christ had now entered into his glory.

So, seeing their glorious teacher, they asked of Him: *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”*

But *‘Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”’*

The sons of Zebedee, James and John knew not what they asked. Though they had seen many things, though they had seen great things. They had not seen the greatest of things, which would have seemed to them the least of things; the worst of things; the most humiliating of things.

They had not yet seen that which St. Polycarp had known through the teaching of the Apostles decades later. They had not seen the crucifixion and death of their Lord, and so they had not seen their Lord’s glory.

What is the cup of the Lord, but his crucifixion? What is the baptism of the Lord, but his death?

‘Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking.”’ For if they knew they were asking to participate in the cup of the Lord’s crucifixion, and the baptism of his death, they would not have been so eager.

Indeed, for to these two sons of Zebedee, the greatest of the disciples, crucifixion was something to be dreaded, and death something to be feared.

And yet, if the cross and grave are so dreadful and so fearsome, for what reason does Our Lord Christ call them His cup and His baptism?

The cross is His cup, for He comes to it with pleasure, that by it He might bring eternal joy to the darkened hearts of men.

The grave is His baptism, for He comes to it as one clean, that by it He might cleanse the world, washing away the sins of the world.

If the sons of Zebedee knew they were asking to participate in the cup of the Lord's crucifixion, and the baptism of His death, they would not have been so eager.

And yet, the Lord makes them a promise: *'The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.'* For they would indeed die as ones joined to the death of Christ. They too would suffer as ones united to the sufferings of Christ.

This is the Lord's promise: that all who are in Him shall suffer with Him; shall die with Him.

Lent is coming to an end; the time of Our Lord's teaching and guiding has concluded; the time of discipline and discipleship is finding its head in Holy Week, where we see the True Disciple of God perfect in obedience to His Father, even *'obedient unto death on a cross.'*

Class is over. Have you learned Our Lord's lesson?

You have come to the Lord's table, to drink the cup of His blood. Do you not know that, by it, you have entered into his crucifixion?

You have been washed by the Lord's baptism, cleansed by His Word. Do you not know that, by it, you have entered into his death?

Suffering and death. These He has promised you, even as He promised them to James and to John.

Some of you even now suffer. Some of you, even now, have known death. Some of you, even now, bear witness to the sufferings around you. Some of you, even now, have known the deaths of those whom you loved. Even in this 'day and hour', death and anguish surround you.

What kind of Lord would make such a cruel promise?

And yet, Saint Polycarp still prays: 'I bless you, Lord, because you have deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of your Christ.'

Saint Polycarp has heard the Word. He has not only seen the glory of the Lord's Passion, but the ecstasy of the Lord's resurrection.

For understand, dear Christians: if you have entered into the Lord's suffering, is it not also true, that He has entered into your suffering?

If you have entered into the Lord's death, is it not also true, that He has entered into your death?

Never now do you suffer alone, but Christ suffers with you.

Never now do you die alone, for Christ dies with you.

And if He dies with you, and you in Him, you shall be raised in Him. You shall be glorified with Him in His glory.

This is the lesson concerning the cup of Our Lord's suffering, which you now come to drink: *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

This is the lesson concerning the baptism of Our Lord's death, through which you have entered into the lowliness of his Church: *Whosoever believes [in Christ] will live, even though he die, and he who believes in Him shall never die.'*

So, we *count even our sufferings as joy, and even our death as profit.* [Do you not hear the Spirit crying from the waters of the font? The Almighty revealing in the cup of blood?]

'For to live is Christ, to die is gain.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:32-45.