

Sermon – March 24, 2024 – Palms Sunday - Pastor Ventura
No Pain no Gain! John 12:20–43

Grace, peace and mercy from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

It took me a while to understand why sometimes CrossFit practitioners, and sports people flaunt their well shaped and fit bodies. At first, I thought it was just showing off. But then something hit me, maybe it is because they know what “no pain, no gain” means. Not that I like people doing it, but I understand that it does take discipline, hard work and indeed lots of pain, to get to a desired level in fitness. Not until I begun to experience some of that of myself, pain I mean, is that I understood what it takes to keep in shape. Some of us try to avoid pain though, only to find out that because we stayed away from pain by not exercising or staying fit, that our bodies have experienced other kinds of pain that sometimes stayed for a long time, I know that very well too. Being proactive in taking care of our bodies by experiencing this reality of “no pain no gain” I think is a good discipline. Knowing our bodies and taking care of that body is very important for living a well-balanced life. That’s what I think, although is not something I faithfully do, I must confess.

Realizing that anything we do either positively or negatively in regard to our physical well being, will cause us pain, be it proactively exercising or letting our bodies be out of shape. Whatever you do, will bring about pain, one way or another. A good tissue massage for example, can be painful, but it will make you feel good. But not stretching before you exert your body working for example, can potentially put you out of commission for a while.

Sure, but... what does that have to do with us today? Well, in the Gospel reading Jesus talks exactly about that “no pain no gain!” And he goes even farther than that, he says that unless there is death there is no fruits, there is no gain. And he demonstrates it. He did so with his passion, his suffering, and ultimately dying on the cross of Calvary. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Vs. 24. He says.

So here we are today on this Palm Sunday. We see Jesus making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But just before that Jesus says: “The hour has come, for the Son of Man to be glorified” (v 23). And as Jesus goes on to make clear, his being “glorified” means his being “lifted up from the earth” to draw all people to himself (v 32). Jesus’ ultimate glory is his crucifixion, by which he draws us to himself.

But for that to happen, Jesus says that he must die, just as a seed would do. He says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (v 24).

What would happen if you preserved a seed? Well, nothing. But if you bury it in the earth, and it will grow up to bear much fruit. So it is with Jesus. Jesus is that grain of wheat that has to die in order to produce the most marvelous fruit. He must go the way of death and the grave, just like a seed is buried into the ground. Jesus will lose his life only to take it up again three days later. But then he will bear much fruit; he will have earned for us the gift of salvation.

But... he must die first. That’s why he came. But his dying has as much to do with you as with Jesus. “Whoever loves his life loses it,” he says, “and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (v 25). And then comes the phrase that might be taxing but beneficial, something we might not like yet necessary, Jesus says: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me” (v 26).

Did you hear that? You must follow him. How it goes for Jesus, so it shall go for you. Expect to get treated like Jesus got treated: trials, temptations, turmoil—and, eventually, dying and rising. Follow Jesus, and that’s what you get.

Now, this is hard talk, isn’t it. And we do don’t like it. We want something more positive, fluffy uplifting, right?

Yet, here is Jesus this morning, he doesn’t care for fluffy style of uplifting. O no, he tells the truth as it is, no fake news, no false advertising. He says that following him would not be easy. He preaches not like today’s

popular TV preachers that often perpetuate the myth, that following Jesus means you can expect nothing but the best, here and now. O no, that's not what Jesus is offering, he means business, with him it is the way of "no pain no gain." If you want fruits and victory, then, hold on to this truth, "no pain, no gain." The false advertising of "Follow Jesus and watch life's pressures and disappointments melt away. Follow Jesus, and you won't have depression or sickness or worry." Is not what he came to preach. No, instead he says: "Follow me, and give up all control. Follow me to the cross and grave. Follow me—and fall into the earth like a grain of wheat and die. And only then you will be fruitful. "No pain, no gain"! No death no life! Why? Because his victory and his glory are indeed unspeakable great.

But what about death? Well, everybody dies, of course, so what's Jesus talking about? What does he mean? Well, think of this, in your baptism you have experienced death and life, spiritual life. The New Testament tells us that Baptism is a kind of death—that in Baptism we are buried with Jesus into death (Rom 6:4)—that in Baptism we died to ourselves but were born new into Christ. (Col 3:3).

Are you baptized? Then say amen.... If you haven't been baptized, we pray the Lord will grant you the desire to be baptized soon. Even here and now... If you are baptized, then you have been buried with Christ into his death. That's a wonderful thing indeed. But remember, the dying and rising of Baptism isn't a one-time event. It's a daily occurrence. Baptism is a way of life: dying to sin, rising to new life with Jesus. At one point, Paul wrote, "I die every day" (1 Cor 15:31). What he meant was that, everyday the old Adam with all his filth and sin needs to be drowned and die.

So, think about this for moment. What needs to die in you? What part of you needs to be put to death? In what area of your life does your old Adam reign supreme? There's a very selfish way of thinking about Holy Week that goes like this: Jesus died and rose for me so that I don't have to change a thing—so that I can live complacently and comfortably, without having to do the hard work of changing my sinful life. I don't have to change, after all God made me this way..... what a fake news....

The reality, the fact is that's the opposite true. Jesus died and rose for me so that everything is changed in me—so that I can do battle daily against the sin in me—against everything that prevents me from following Jesus. That's what Luther says baptizing with water indicates. Holy Week is not about living complacently—about watching Jesus' agonizing prayers, arrest, trials, and crucifixion all unfold with a spectator's detachment. Holy Week is about the urgency of putting to death every part of you that loves this life more than Jesus and the eternal life he gives.

And so, again, I ask: What—in you—needs to die? What needs to be buried? Is it your need to be in control and in charge at all times, or is it your utter apathy, indifference, and laziness? Maybe it's that you draw your identity from what other people think about you, that you get your self-worth from your good grades or your great career instead of regarding yourself above all else as a baptized child of God. Or maybe you've let yourself be defined by your defeats and you've resigned yourself to victimhood. What part of you needs to be put to death? What are your addictions, and do you love them or hate them—feed them or starve them? Do you lack generosity because you're holding your money and possessions far too tightly? Do you charge into every challenging situation behind a shield of anger and rage? Is it your way of thinking? Some of us want to, even are in the habit of blaming everybody else for what we are going through, except our own selves. But, as you see, arriving to that point, to realizing that it might be our fault and not of those around us, for what we experience in life, is indeed painful. We don't want to do that. Blaming others is easier, confronting our own selves is harder and painful. Of course, we are not going to diminish the fact of victims that have been victimized by the injustices of others. That's not our point here though, however we can't ignore the fact that even when we are victims of something or someone else, and it is not our own fault, but remaining victims, might be our own faults, but sometimes that is hard to recognize it, even painful.

It could be anything or everything—something different for each of us. But whatever it is, it is evidence. It is evidence of how much we love our life

in this world. Whatever sin has enslaved you, recognize the threat. Put it to death. Bury it with Jesus.

It's not easy. It's painful and difficult. But with Jesus—with faith in Jesus—all things are possible, including the hard work of repentance. Yes, it is painful, but remember, “no pain, no gain”! Let's say it... no pain no gain....

Remember also that many a times we lack the guts to take this statement seriously, but you have a Savior who is all guts and all glory. Jesus saw his impending death as his hour of greatest glory. Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For all the sin in you that needs to die—Jesus died. And it was his moment of glory.

It's a strange combination Death and glory, isn't it? You and I would never even think of using those two words in the same sentence. What seems glorious to us in this world usually means applause and compliments. For us, glory means basking in the spotlight, fame and fortune. It means winning, not losing—and certainly not dying. But the glory of Jesus is centered on the cross. The glory of Jesus doesn't shine; it bleeds. It bleeds for you and for your salvation.

It is mind boggling, isn't it? That Jesus glory is in his sacrifice and death. But really, it is there, in the darkness of death that Jesus' glory shines brightest, in his dying victory begins to shine. It is his victory, because he allows himself to be killed, but he knows that on the third day he will victoriously come back to life. There, there is his victory over death, therefore his death is really a victory over death.

Jesus said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” (v 32). By his death on the cross, Jesus lifts you up—lifts you up out of your sin and shame and draws you to himself. As you see when we sin, when we don't allow, when we don't want to suffer temporary pain, we will suffer eternal death. There will be no gain. There will be no life, only death, and that is no gain at all. But in the glorious death of Jesus, Jesus lifts you up from death to life. In that glorious death, God and sinners are

reconciled. Your sin is forgiven. Men and women are justified. “If we have been united with [Jesus] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5). Die with Jesus—and rise with Jesus. Jesus is drawing you to himself, and he will not stop until you behold him face to face. There, unless the grain dies there will be no fruit, but in Christ, we have a marvelous fruit, eternal life in him.

So, we gather today, reminding ourselves that in our baptisms, we have been crucified and buried with Christ. But his glorious death is not just a death, it in fact your glorious death. You no longer live, but Christ lives in you. In Jesus, you are that grain of wheat—a solitary seed—dead to yourself but alive to God in Christ. You’ve been buried in the fertile soil of Jesus’ death so that you, too, might rise and bear much fruit. May this Holy Week be for you absolutely glorious!

Amen.