

Unless we become grains of wheat...

On the Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 21, 2015 Carl E. Olson



Readings:

- Jer 31:31-34
- Ps 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15
- Heb 5:7-9
- Jn 12:20-33

“If a tree falls in a forest,” goes the philosophical riddle, “and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

In today’s Gospel we hear something similar, yet not it is not a riddle or philosophical puzzle, but a clear response and a spiritual challenge. “Amen, amen, I say to you,” Jesus said, “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.”

Put as a question: if a grain of wheat does not fall to the ground and die, will it bear fruit? No, the Lord says, it will not. For although death is the enemy, it is also, paradoxically, the means to everlasting life. “By death,” the Byzantine Easter chorus announces, “he conquered death.” Such paradoxes appear contradictory and illogical, but they express a truth; it is a surprising and profound truth, as with the analogy used by Jesus. But how is it that those who love their lives will lose them? What does it mean to say that whoever hates his life in this world will gain eternal life?

This strong language is quite similar to Jesus' assertion that if "any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). We know, of course, that Jesus did not condone hatred of family or strangers. Rather, by using a common form of Semitic rhetoric, he brought into bold relief the two possible options: either put Jesus first, where he belongs, or put him somewhere else.

It is never wrong to love our family, but it is wrong to put our families or ourselves before Jesus and the things of God. The man who loves his life in this world is a man who puts more sweat, tears, and time into this world than he does into the kingdom of God. If we live as though this passing, temporal world is our highest priority, it necessarily means that we have placed something that is good, because it is from God, above the greatest Good, which in turn pits that good thing against God.

Some might argue—as many critics of Christianity do—that such thinking forms people who are so heavenly-minded they are of no earthly good. In reality, the Christian who is oriented toward his final destination and who lives with the hope of heaven is of the greatest earthly good, for he rightly perceives the place and value of this world.

After all, no man has ever been more heavenly-minded than Jesus Christ, and no man has ever done more earthly good than Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, human history is marked with the tragic and bloody remains of those destroyed by men who were so earthly-minded that they were of no heavenly or earthly good.

St. Irenaeus, in his famous work, "Against Heresies," observed that a kernel of wheat "falling into the earth and becoming decomposed rises and is multiplied by the Spirit of God, who contains all things. And then, through the wisdom of God, it serves for our use when, after receiving the Word of God, it becomes the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ. In the same way our bodies, being nourished by it, and deposited in the earth and suffering decomposition there, shall rise at their appointed time."

The God-fearing Greeks who came to Jerusalem to worship during the Passover said, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." This is the desire of those who know this world is not enough; they want to see and know the One who is Truth. And when the Eucharist is lifted up at Mass, we do see Jesus. We receive him completely. Having died with him in baptism, we will one day, by God's grace, rise with Him at our appointed time.