

This weekend, it should be easy to recognize a change in the tone of our Lenten observance. Traditionally, this fifth Sunday of Lent was called Passion Sunday because on this day the Church begins to make the sufferings of our Redeemer her chief thought. Even before we heard the readings, this change is clear to see. Last Sunday, we took a moment to rejoice. We replaced our purple vestments with rose and we even brought flowers and more joyful music into our worship. But now we are approaching the most solemn part of Lent. Next weekend will be Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Soon we will be immersed in the great mysteries of our salvation.

The covering of our statues is a sign of this. We veil some of the beauty of our church so that we can focus our minds and our hearts more fully on the sacred mysteries for which we have been preparing. Throughout Lent we have encountered greater periods of silence in the liturgy so that we can listen to the Lord's voice with the ear of our hearts. And now we embrace something of a visual silence so that all of our thoughts and senses may be directed to the Lord.

But the deepening of our Lenten observance is witnessed not only in vestments and in covered statues, we hear this change of tone in the readings, as well. In the Gospel we hear these words from the lips of the Lord Jesus:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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 dies, it produces much fruit.

Jesus gives a clear indication to His disciples that the time of fulfillment had come. Throughout His ministry, Jesus had prepared them for what was to come at the end of His life. Now His words reveal to them that "The hour has come..."

For us who have celebrated these sacred mysteries year in and year out, this announcement of the coming hour of the death of Jesus may not be so full of mystery and power as it once was. But what very likely remains mysterious to us is what brought about these words of Jesus. What caused Jesus to say, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”? It was the arrival of the Greeks. Our Gospel today opens with some Greek people coming to Philip asking if they could speak to Jesus. But when Philip and Andrew approached Jesus to inform Him of this request, the response of Jesus was not what we might expect. It seems that instead of speaking with them, Jesus immediately began this explanation of the coming hour.

Why this response? Why does the arrival of the Greeks lead to the beginning of the Passion of Jesus? It is because the arrival of the Greeks is a sign of the fulfillment of God’s plan. From the very beginning of God’s revelation to His people Israel, His plan was to use His Chosen People to reveal Himself to all the nations.

The prophets of the Old Testament repeated this message and Jesus Himself continued this mission of gathering all the nations, Jews and Gentiles, into the one people of God. So the arrival of the Greeks shows that this plan is coming to fulfillment. The arrival of the Greeks is a sign that the words of the prophet Jeremiah were about to be fulfilled:

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.... No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the LORD. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

The fulfillment of God's plan was at hand. The law was being written on the hearts of all peoples. The new covenant was beginning. This is why the arrival of the Greeks was a clear sign to Jesus that the hour had come. It was time for Him to inaugurate this new covenant.

Every time we offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass we are reminded just how this new covenant is made. "Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." This new covenant was celebrated first by Jesus at the Last supper and then brought to fulfillment the next day as He gave His life for us on the Cross.

This is the covenant that we enter through baptism and which is strengthened in Confirmation and in the Eucharist. Through this covenant we enter into the saving mysteries of Christ. As Christians, we are not to be silent spectators at the Lord's Passion; rather, through this covenant, we ourselves become sharers in the Cross of Christ. As disciples of Jesus, we must take up our cross and follow Him. This has been the invitation for us throughout the season of Lent - that we should be obedient to the Lord's command: If you would be my disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. But now, as Lent comes to its crescendo, that invitation becomes even more urgent.

These last weeks of Lent should continue the renewal and the conversion that has begun in us. Don't miss the opportunities for confession and reconciliation that will be offered in these next two weeks. Don't miss the opportunity to encounter the love of God through the beauty and power of the sacred liturgies of Holy Week. Instead, may these last two weeks of Lent stir up in us the Covenant that was made in the Blood of Christ, the covenant that strengthen us to carry our cross as faithful and obedient disciples.