

Something feels different this week, doesn't it? Something feels a little more somber, a little more heartbreaking, a little more ominous.

Something looks different in church today, doesn't it? The traditional color purple turns into a little red, a little bloody, a little intense, a little passionate.

Next Sunday is Passion Sunday when we celebrate the triumphant entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem before His passion amidst the waving of palms and singing, "Hosana to the son of David," to welcome him.

And the Gospel for this Sunday from St. John has a different, dramatic tone to it than we've heard in these last four Sundays of Lent. Something has somehow changed.

"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?"

The Lord said.

Jesus must have sensed something was going to happen to Him soon. And the thought of it troubled him. Like all of us when facing something painful, Jesus's heartbeat quickened, his body shook, fear spread throughout him.

But the will of Jesus fought against the feelings in his body. Like a soldier going into battle, a fireman running into a burning building, a woman about to have a child, he riveted his attention on the reason for his crucifixion, not on the pain it would cause him.

For what he was going to accomplish, or allow to be done to him, gave strength and victory to his will over his cringing body. Referring to himself, 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."**

Should not that philosophy be ours?

But if truth must be said, many of us, including myself, cringe from pain and suffering, death and dying.

We shun pain, our body tells us to run the other way. Not only does physical pain repel us, so does psychological and emotional.

To live with someone who makes us unhappy, who is always criticizing us, who hits us, is not something any of us cares to put up with. And so, we hide in the closet, we run away, we move out, we get divorced, there is a parting of the ways.

Neither physical, mental, emotional, nor psychological pain and suffering do we find attractive. Jesus most assuredly did not. However, he did not run away from his “trouble”, but embraced it all out of love for us.

A story is told about the Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe, a prisoner in the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

In July 1941, when a prisoner escaped, the Nazi commandant in reprisal ordered ten men from the missing prisoner’s barrack to be starved to death. One of the men selected cried out: “My wife! My children!” Fr. Kolbe immediately asked to take the man’s place. In the starvation bunker he celebrated Mass daily and gave Communion to his fellow prisoners. Sympathetic guards brought him unleavened bread and small quantities of wine.

After three weeks without food or water, the priest and three other prisoners were still alive. When he alone remained, he was killed by a lethal injection. Forty-one years after his death, the man he saved was present at Fr. Kolbe’s Canonization Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II in October of 1982.

Would any of us have the courage to make a sacrifice comparable to that made by the man whom we may now call St. Maximilian Kolbe?

We cannot say. What we can say is that there is a direct line between the words of Jesus about the seed falling into the earth and dying, so that it can become fruitful, and the willingness of this Polish priest to sacrifice his life, so that a brother human being with responsibility for wife and children might live.

Like Jesus who came into the world to save us from our sins, suffered and died to give us life, and like St. Maximilian Kolbe who sacrificed his life for another man, we too must take our stand beneath Jesus' cross and contemplate in silent awe and reverent love the One who hangs there.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

Dying is never easy. For many of us, including myself, self-sacrificing is too difficult. But we all have seen the truth of this. Whether we have watched our grass seed grow -- or seen a butterfly emerge from a cocoon -- we understand that death means transformation. I also think most of us "get it" that to achieve something greater, we must endure many smaller deaths.

A pregnant woman dies to her life of comfort, her previous way of eating and drinking in order to nurture the new life that is growing.

When a young man becomes a father, he dies to "hanging out with the guys", and is called out to be transformed by something much greater than himself alone.

When someone is a caregiver for a person who is ill or disabled, they must die to their own schedule, their sleep and private time, in order to be Christ to someone in need.

And so, dear friends, if we believe Jesus, and are ready to embrace these profound and challenging words from the mouth of the Lord, if we are ready to be a grain of wheat, if you are ready to "die" so that life may grow abundantly on this earth . . . be willing to embrace our crosses as Jesus was going to do it, and learn from Him, that when we lose our life for others, we preserve it, and when we die, we rise to a life of greater beauty, meaning, and purpose.

And so, dying is not a bad thing. Not when we do it for someone else. Not when we do it for our God who has done it for us first.

May the remaining Lenten journey, yours and mine, continue to be fruitful.