

**Sermon for Morning Prayer:
The Fifth Sunday in Lent,
called Passion Sunday**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest in Charge

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith [SETH] the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

“Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith [SETH] the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. Peter.³

“... Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

St. Peter says in the New Testament Lesson, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is coming upon you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you.”

But some people are not only surprised but angry as well when they are called upon to bear some of the pain and experience some of the heartache of the world. As Christians, we have as our hero and the founder of our faith a Man who was a victim of injustice and died a horrible death before the age of 40. Yet we seem to think that we should somehow be exempt from the sufferings that others endure.

In many religions, especially primitive religions, there is assumed to be a kind of contract between a worshiper and the god he worships. The worshiper will pay tribute and offer sacrifice to the god and will try to live in the way that god approves. In return the god will protect the worshiper from harm and will, in fact reward him with a good crop or a successful hunt or with victory in war.

St. Peter is writing to people who have just come out of such a religion, and seem to expect that their new faith will work basically like the old one. If they obey the Golden Rule and come to church regularly and contribute money and follow the discipline of life laid out by the Church, God will protect them and reward them. There are people today who have the same idea, and some of them have been in the Church long enough to know better.

The Lord told us Himself that if we choose to follow Him we should expect to be treated as He was treated. St. Peter reminds his readers of that.

It would be nice to think that everybody gets what they deserve in life. At least that's what I think on those days when I have been righteous and devout. But the world doesn't work that way and neither does our religion. The Apostle makes that clear by focusing on the sufferings of Christ.

Between now and Easter that is what we will be doing. Next Sunday the entire Passion narrative will be read from St. Matthew. Each day of the following week, the Prayer Book provides for the reading of a portion of that story from other Gospels, culminating in St. John's account of the Crucifixion on Good Friday. After reading all that, and knowing what kind of man Jesus was, how can anyone believe that everybody gets what they deserve in this world?

The good news is that Good Friday is not the end of the story. There is Easter, when the world's judgement is overturned by a higher authority. There is the ascension when Jesus returns to the Father who sent Him and receives the highest honor possible. There is Pentecost when God breathes new life into the world. And there is a day yet to come when the glory of the risen Christ will be revealed for all to see. St. Peter says that when that day comes, those who have shared in the sufferings of Christ will also share in His glory.

I'm going to tell you a story, and I hope you will forgive me if I tear and break down as I tell it. Some years ago, my daughter gave birth to a son. He had a hole in his heart, a condition that is always fatal.

The local priest was called to baptize the child. They named him Gregory. A helicopter flew the child to the hospital of the University of Georgia, but nothing could be done. He lived for three days and died in his mother's arms.

The whole family rushed to the army base where my son-in-law was stationed and arrived in time to take turns holding little Gregory before he died.

I consoled myself and the family with the thought that Gregory was in the hands of God and the rest of us had been granted a share in the sufferings of Christ.

One of the worst things about suffering in this world is that it tends to make you feel alone. It isolates you from those who want to help you but cannot share your experience. Jesus can and Jesus does. His sufferings unite with ours and draw us closer to Him.

"Rejoice," says the Apostle, "in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also be glad and rejoice when his glory is revealed."

Of course, people do sometimes get what they deserve in this world. St. Peter says, "let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a troublemaker." When you are punished for such behavior you are merely getting what you deserve and you have no claim to share in the glory of Christ. But Christ did not deserve to suffer, and when you also suffer unjustly, and bear it with patience as He did, you too are glorified by God.

The glory is already in you as it was in Christ when He hung on the cross. That glory has not yet been revealed for all the world to see. Perhaps even you cannot see it in yourself. But it is there. And so the Apostle says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is coming upon you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice, in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also be glad and rejoice when his glory is revealed."

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St. David's Anglican Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 1:10-20 (KJV).

³ I Peter 4:12-19 (KJV).

⁴ I Peter 4:12-13 (RSV).