

## Lent 5

There are many wonderful things that take place in human life, but certainly one of the most wonderful of all is to watch a young person mature. What parents do not beam with pride at a graduation when their son or daughter walks on the stage to receive his or her diploma from grammar or high school or college? I remember graduations at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. The president of the university insisted on shaking the hand of every single student, and as each student shook his hand, the families of the students would break into applause, even though they had been asked not to do so until all the diplomas had been given out. There would be whistling, cheering and shouting, one family louder than the other. Decorum was thrown to the winds. My own reaction as a non-parent was very different. I wanted to tell these parents that their son or daughter wasn't the only one graduating and that their prolonged shouting and cheering made it impossible for the name of the next student to be heard. Of course I couldn't do a thing but suffer in silence, and even if I had been able to try to do something, my efforts would have been unsuccessful. Parental pride was going to have its way, come hell or high water.

And we all understand why. These parents were seeing the fruits of their labors of twenty years. This beautiful young girl who had achieved a 3.9 grade average, this handsome young man who was going on to medical school was their baby, the one whose diapers they had changed a thousand time, the one who had to be taught to share with others and control a bad temper, the one who had to be encouraged and consoled as a teen-ager after not making the baseball team or the honor role. Now their work was done, and the product had turned out very well. They were bursting with pride that this young person was their son or daughter.

Do you think that we could apply this experience to the relationship which existed between God the Father and Jesus? Could we describe God as the proud father of Jesus? There are scenes in the Gospels which describe God in these terms. At the baptism of Jesus and again at his transfiguration a voice from heaven, that is, the voice of the Father, says: "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." Yes, the Father is well pleased with his son Jesus.

But what are we to make of those times when the Son was suffering? I think we have to say that the Father, like a human father, must have been suffering then too. Scholars tell us that the

Greek understanding of God did not allow God emotions such as joy or sadness because these were seen as limitations. God was beyond such limitations because they implied change, which in turn implied imperfection. If God could change, that would mean that He could become better or worse. But that was impossible because God was already perfect and would always remain perfect.

Do we think of God in this Greek philosophical way? If we do, we are more Greek than Jewish or Christian. The God of the Jewish scriptures is full of emotions and therefore change. At time he regrets what He has done. Indeed, in a reading from the Book of Exodus at daily Mass on Thursday God decides to abandon his people because of their sinfulness and tells Moses that he will start again with another people. But Moses pleads with God and God changes his mind. He relents. If this is the true or truer picture of God, then how do we imagine God when he looks at our world in all its evil, its violence, its wars, its rapes, its torture? Must we not imagine that God is crying, and crying most of the time? God bent over the world in tears, brooding over it in sorrow. Must this not be our picture of God if we are to remain faithful to the Jewish Scriptures?

And in the New Testament? In the New Testament Jesus, whom we confess to be God among us in human form, cries just once. When he is at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, he begins to weep, and the reason seems to be that he is moved by his friend's death and by the weeping and sorrow of the family. "See how he loved him," the text goes on to say. And we know that Jesus was angry. We saw that two Sundays ago when we read about his cleansing of the temple. Then we have that moving scene in the Garden when he sweats blood in his struggle to accept his own fate. Our second reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews could be understood to be a commentary on that scene: "In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." See the change in Jesus here. Not that he was ever disobedient. But he learned, that is, he grew more obedient in and through his experiences. He was just like us. He grew with his life experiences. He changed.

If both the Father and the Son are moved, and therefore changed, when they are confronted with human suffering, then we, who are

supposed to be like them, must also be moved by it. We too must change. Change from indifference when confronted with suffering to involvement in an attempt to remove it, or, if that is not possible, then to face it in faith, hope and love, for these virtues will change it as well. Let us pray that, like Jesus, we will be heard because of our reverence for God. Let us pray that like the Lord we too may be made perfect in and through our sufferings and in this way become a source of eternal salvation for our sisters and brothers.