

Father O'Connor's Homily for 17 March 2024
Fifth Sunday of Lent – B

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Hebrews 5: 7-9

John 12: 20-33

Today I have some “happy information” to share with you. And then I have “the Lord’s Good News for us” in today’s Gospel to reflect upon with you.

So first is the “happy information.”

In the Fall of 2021 our Saint Joseph Parish and our Nativity of the BVM Parish participated separately, but simultaneously, in the Diocesan Heart of a Shepherd Campaign to raise \$30 million for these purposes:

--to improve our seminaries [Borromeo and Saint Mary], and to assist our seminarians, our newly-ordained priests and our retired clergy, and to strengthen our parishes financially after the COVID-19 pandemic;

--with 65% of the funds raised coming back to each parish up to its goal, and 80% coming back to each parish after the goal is reached;

--the completion of the three-year pledge fulfillment will be in December 2024, so there are still more funds to come back to each of our parishes during the four quarters of this year. [The quarterly returns are regularly posted in the bulletin.]

Nativity raised \$86,437.00: 133% of its goal, for these purposes:

--for a new church roof, which has been accomplished

--and for strengthening the parish savings, which is ongoing.

Saint Joseph raised \$624,257.00: 155% of its goal, for these purposes:

--for a new church roof, which has been accomplished

--for the elimination of the Church Enhancement debt, which has been satisfied

--and for strengthening the parish savings, which is ongoing.

At Saint Joseph, there were three “alternates” for the Church Enhancement Project of 2019-2020 that still needed funding in order to be accomplished:

--the stained-glass windows in Gathering Area: a family came forward and made this possible with a very generous gift
--a new bell tower: another family made this possible with a very generous gift
--a new organ: YOU have made this possible from your Heart of a Shepherd pledge fulfillments so that we do not have to do any additional fundraising for this new organ. It is a new 3-manual Rodgers Imagine Digital Organ. This organ is being installed right now and should be ready for Easter.

Thank you so much, Saint Joseph parishioners and Nativity parishioners, for what you are enabling YOUR parish to accomplish! Well done, everyone!

And now for “the Lord’s Good News for us” in today’s Gospel.

Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel: “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.”

Seeds in a packet can remain on the shelf, just as they are, for a long time. But once planted in the ground “and dying to themselves” they sprout new life.

The grain of wheat dying and producing much fruit is Jesus’ prediction of His own passion, death and resurrection.

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, I thought that I would place before you a long-standing devotion of the Church that centers on this theme. It is known as “the Stations of the Cross.”

The Stations of the Cross were promoted by the Franciscans. In medieval times, pilgrimages were very popular. In those days they did not have 747s to jet them across the waters and air-conditioned buses to take them around. No, they walked or they rode donkeys or took slow boats. And such pilgrimages often took months.

One of the favorite pilgrimage sites was the Holy Land. People wanted to visit the very spots where Jesus had walked, especially on His way to Calvary through the streets of Jerusalem, called the “Via Dolorosa” [“the Sorrowful Way”].

For many people it was impossible to make the actual trip to the Holy Land. So pictures of these sites were placed along roadsides and inside

churches back home. The number of pictures varied from seven to twenty-four, but by the 18th century fourteen became the standard number of the Stations of the Cross, as they are today.

They are called “stations” which means “stopping places,” [as in the sense of “train stations,” where the train stops – boards and exits passengers – and then continues its journey]. The pilgrim is to “stop before each scene” of Christ’s way to Calvary and do two things: 1) reflect upon it and 2) enter into it – becoming a participant in Jesus’ journey.

[The Stations of the Cross here in Saint Joseph Church are from a now-closed church in the Diocese of Toledo, and they are more than 100 years old. Think how many people have united their sufferings with the sufferings of Christ by praying before these Stations over the last 100+ years.]

I now invite you to reflect upon and enter into six of these Stations of the Cross with me.

The First Station: Jesus Is Condemned to Death by Pontius Pilate. First, we reflect upon this scene.

Have you ever stood, at any time in your life, falsely accused, when rumors spread about you, when you were the victim of gossip? And no matter how hard you tried to explain yourself, no one wanted to believe you?

Then, we enter into this scene.

If you were standing there with Jesus, unjustly accused, how would you act? Do you identify with Jesus before Pontius Pilate, keeping silent and offering up your humiliation for the sins of the world? Or at least knowing that Jesus has been there before you, and that God will have the last word?

[The Second Station is: Jesus Accepts His Cross. And the Third Station is: Jesus Falls the First Time.]

The Fourth Station: Jesus Meets His Mother, Mary. Mary’s heart was broken not only because she saw her Son humiliated and going to His death as a common criminal. But most of all because she could do nothing to help Him. The Roman soldiers kept her back.

Mary is every parent unable to save their child. Every parent who watches by the hospital bed. Every parent who has buried a child. Every parent who stands by helplessly to watch a child self-destruct with drugs or alcohol. Or every parent who pleads with God for a son or daughter living a

sinful lifestyle, or who has left the Church, or whose marriage is falling apart.

Mary is every parent who wants so badly to save their child – and can't. At least not right now. But they continue to offer their prayers and their tears and their love. Like Mary, they never give up.

The Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene Is Forced to help Jesus Carry His Cross. Those who stand a long time at this Station are people who carry crosses they did not ask for. No one wants the cancer, the addiction, the divorce, the job loss, the depression – or other crosses of all descriptions.

So many of us are like Simon of Cyrene and don't want to help Jesus carry His cross. We get angry with God and are frustrated. But Simon was moved from anger to love – and to his own salvation. And all because He willingly embraced the cross of Jesus. Could that be our calling as well?

[The Sixth Station is: Veronica Offers Her Veil to Jesus. The Seventh Station is: Jesus Falls the Second Time. And the Eighth Station is: Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem.]

The Ninth Station: Jesus Falls the Third Time. [Notice the placement of this Station here in Saint Joseph Church. Very appropriately it is on the wall between the Reconciliation Room on the left and the Shrine of Jesus, Divine Mercy on the right.]

People who spend time here might be saying: “Here I stand with my habits of sin – the nasty words that come out of my mouth before I can stop them; the quick judgment; the ongoing gossip; the anger and sarcasm; the addiction to internet pornography and sexual self-gratification.

“No matter how hard I try, no matter how often I confess it, no matter how badly I feel afterwards, I can't stop this sin. I keep on falling, like Jesus did on His way to Calvary.”

But maybe this Station should have a different title than “Jesus falls the third time.” Maybe it should read instead, “Jesus gets up again the third time.”

Lord, don't let me get discouraged. O God of the Second Chance, here I am again! Please help me.

[The Tenth Station is: Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments. The Eleventh Station is: Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross.]

The Twelfth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross. Jesus hanging on the cross forgives His enemies: “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.”

And here I stand deservedly accused. How can I be so unforgiving of other people?

[The Thirteenth Station is: Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross.]

The Fourteenth Station: Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb. There are many people at this Station. And they are crying: “It is dark and dry in my life.” “It is hard to pray. I get no answers when I do.” “My faith is routine and empty. God seems to have abandoned me.”

Like the people who put the lifeless body of Jesus in the tomb along with their hopes, and rolled a heavy stone to close the entrance way, I feel a heavy stone rolled over my heart.

But these same people are in for a BIG surprise on Easter Sunday.
O God of Surprises, find me soon! Find me soon!

These Fourteen Stations are a powerful devotion.

We are not alone. We are walking in Jesus’ footsteps.

The Stations of the Cross reflect our pain, but they also give us hope.

For the story of our salvation does not end with Station Fourteen.

Jesus rises from the dead early Easter Sunday morning.

He has given us a share in His victory, and we “look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

We have been praying the Stations together on Friday evenings during Lent. The next opportunities will be this coming Friday at Nativity Church at 7:00 PM and on Good Friday evening at 7:00 PM at Saint Joseph Church. The Good Friday Stations will be a very special Taize musical setting with the combined choirs of Saint Joseph Parish, Amherst and Saint Peter Parish, Lorain. I hope that you are able to join us.

“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.”

“We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”