

# 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

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When I was a boy it was not uncommon for close friends to 'seal their friendship by scratching themselves to draw blood and then mingling their blood together. It may seem bizarre today – and certainly not a good idea from the health and safety point of view – but I think it was inspired the popularity of Westerns in those days and the supposed practice of American Indians! However the general idea goes back much further. In the Old Testament the covenants between God and Abraham and God and Moses are sealed by the blood of animal sacrifices. We have many examples of covenants from the Ancient world. A treaty was concluded by equals but a covenant was where a more powerful neighbour offered protection in return for loyalty. Down the centuries God's chosen people broke their covenant with God many times but he did not give up on them. The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a New Covenant – a hope to be fulfilled only with the coming of Christ.

God our Father comes to our rescue. He sends his Son to share our human flesh. His Son will show us how to live by the Commandments, not just by teaching them, but by living them to the full. The ultimate sign of his obedience is accepting an undeserved death on the cross as a sign of his love for us. Our Lord gives his life not for one person, but for the whole of humanity, and for you and me individually, so that we may live for ever in God's company. Through shedding his blood on the cross Jesus seals a New and Everlasting Covenant. By becoming part of this Covenant through the grace of baptism the Holy Spirit makes us his dwelling place. We are freed from sin. We have the grace we need to live by God's commandments. Even when we fail, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced on the cross, pours out an unending stream of blood and water, sacramental grace that heals and renews us.

Our Lord uses the parable of a grain of wheat to explain what the disciples do not yet understand. A seed contains the potential to grow into a new plant and produce seed of its own, but this cannot happen unless the seed is buried in the soil, for nature to break down the husk, and allow the seed to draw in water and begin to sprout. God's plan is already under way when he takes out human nature to himself in the conception and birth of Jesus, but it cannot be completed unless he also shares the human experience of death. Without this he could still teach us by example but he would be distanced from us but what he did not share. He must share human pain, suffering and death. Only in this way can he redeem death and open the doorway to eternal life for all of us. This is why he says that he his whole life has been a preparation for this hour. "When I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw all men to myself." From today the Church veils the crucifix and crosses in our churches. As we begin Passiontide it is a powerful visual aid, intended to remind us of the centrality of the cross of Christ.

The resurrection of Our Lord at Easter is the moment of our rebirth into eternal life with him. Orthodox icons and mediaeval wall paintings depict this as the 'harrowing of hell'. Jesus is shown going to the underworld to lead out into eternal life Adam and Eve and all the saints of Old Testament times. The seed yields a rich harvest. The harvest of the cross is the crowd of saints in glory in heaven – this is why the statues of the saints remain veiled until the Easter Vigil. We are called to be among their number. Christ our Lord is at the side of his Father in heaven praying for us right now. The Mass and Holy Eucharist are the sacramental signs of this New Covenant sealed in his precious blood – a covenant and promise he has made to us through our baptism and accepted on our behalf by our parents and godparents. As the power of God transcends time and space we ask the Lord, arms outstretched upon the cross, to draw us to himself in love, to forgive our sins, and to help us live as true sons and daughters of God.