

## Lent 5 (2025)

You are on an airplane, perhaps reading or just thinking, and a voice comes over the loudspeaker system: **“We are beginning our descent into such and such airport.”**

It won't be long before you are at your destination.

That is the feeling we get on Passion Sunday. Our journey to the cross is nearly complete, but we are not quite there yet. ///

Our Lord's public ministry can be divided into three phases.

The first phase was initial enthusiasm and acceptance; the second, disappointment and questioning; the third, out-and-out hostility and rejection, principally on the part of the Jewish religious leaders.

In today's Gospel, we find ourselves in this third phase, as seen in the closing words of this passage: **“Then they took up stones to cast at him.”**

But what I want to focus on this morning is not so much the hostility of the religious leaders, but on two salient facts about Jesus highlighted in today's Gospel.

Both facts will help us to understand the significance of the cross and what our response ought to be to it.

The first fact concerns **our Lord's sinless humanity**.

There is no doubt that Jesus' humanity was real. He ate, drank, breathed air and interacted with people in ways common to us all.

But there was something different about Him as well.

He was able to look the world – including His severest critics -- in the eye and ask: **Which of you can find any fault with me?**

I know I wouldn't dare ask this question. If I did, we would likely be here all afternoon as one hand after another would go up.

Yet, this is what we find Jesus doing in this morning's Gospel. The amazing thing is that even His bitterest enemies were unable to find anything to say.

Later, at the sham trial that took place following His arrest in the garden, members of the Jewish counsel, who very hostile to Him, were faced with the same dilemma. They were hard pressed to find in Him anything worthy of death.

So what did they do? /// They were forced to bring in false witnesses.

Trafficking in falsehoods was the way of Jesus' opponents all the way to the end of His life. It is still the way of the world today.

If don't believe me, look at the tabloids at the grocery store or at the stuff that gets passed on social media. Whatever is not true, whatever is not honorable, not of good report, is there and celebrated.

But, back to my point: Jesus was fully human. He got hungry and thirsty, was subject to cold and heat. If a briar pricked His finger, he bled red blood. He faced temptations, shed real tears at the death of a loved one, was misunderstood and falsely accused.

But, in one way alone, He was different. He was without the flaws we all possess as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. He represents a new, restored humanity . . . a humanity you and I are called to share in. **“In Christ, new creation,”** says Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

We are called to die to the ways of the old Adam and take on the characteristics of the New. Are we doing this?

If Christians were radically different from others, there would be more Christians! No doubt about it.

Dare to be different. Ask the Holy Spirit to mold you into Christ's image. Cooperate with the grace you have been given.

That is the path and goal of all who have died and risen with Christ in baptism. Not sinless yet, but making progress . . . hopefully!

So, the first fact we have set before us in this Gospel is Jesus' sinless humanity. The second is **His eternal Sonship**. He who is true man is also true God.

Two of our Lord's sayings in this passage leave us in no doubt of His divinity. The first is

found in verse 51: **“Verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man keep my word, he shall never see death.”**

Of course, His critics misunderstand His words. They think He is saying that His followers will never die, but, of course, that is not what He meant, at least in a physical sense.

Rather, He means that in Him is life from above . . . life that transcends this present age.

Archbishop William Temple had a interesting take on this verse. He translates it: **“If a man observe my word, he shall not *notice* death.”**

In other words, death for one in Christ is not a full stop (a period) or a question mark but an exclamation point. Because Jesus lives, we shall live also! It is passing from one sphere to another.

When old Bishop Candler of the Methodist Church lay dying, someone asked him, **“Bishop Candler, do you fear crossing the river of death?”**

His response: **“No, why should I? My Father owns the land on both sides of the river.”** And so, he does.

Let’s pause here to give thanks that death will not have the final word in our lives and in the lives of those we love.

But there is another saying in today’s Gospel that highlights our Lord’s eternal Sonship. It is found in verse 58: **“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”**

Abraham was a great man. From His descent came God’s covenant people. He was a man of faith and action. He stands an example for people of all time.

Nevertheless, Jesus is greater. The **I AM** at the end of this saying identifies Jesus with the God who spoke with Moses out of the burning bush in Genesis.

Paul in would go on to amplify Jesus' unique and eternal sonship in Colossians 1:16 and 17:

**“For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.”**

What this means to us is that in Jesus we have a complete and accurate picture of God. If you want to know what the invisible Creator of heaven and earth is like, look to Jesus the eternal Son.



More than that, the love Jesus demonstrated on the cross is none other than the love of God. He loved you this much. Keep that thought in mind next week as the Passion narrative is read on Palm Sunday.

Further still, because Jesus is Son of the Father His word can be trusted.

For example, when He says in John 3:16 -- **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”** – we are given a promise on which we can stake our life and boldly share with others.

This past week I watched a YouTube video featuring a man who visits churches different from his own for the purpose of gaining understanding. His name is Matt Whitman. He comes from a conservative evangelical background.

In this particular video, he visited what might be described as a theologically ‘progressive’ Episcopal Church in St. Louis, Missouri.

The first half of the video was fascinating, The Rector described the architecture of the 1938 building.

In the second half, the focus shifted to matters of faith. Whitman asked the Rector how one becomes a Christian.

Let me say from the outset, I found this Rector’s response lack-luster and disappointing.

He spoke about such things as welcoming people who make no profession of the Christian faith to the Communion Table . . . a curious thought to say the least.

He then went on to say it was not his approach to try to persuade people or call them to faith in Christ.

As I listened to him, I could not help but think if Peter and Paul and others in the early Church had adopted his approach, there would be no Christian Church today.

No, Jesus, because of He is the eternal Son of God, is absolutely unique. He comes with good news, news that is meant to be shared, news how broken people can be made whole.

The Christians message is not just – **“Well, here is a religious system you might want to try on to see if it fits . . . to see if you get some good vibes from it.”**

No, the call of the Gospel is: **“Look unto me [the God we meet in Jesus] whoever, wherever you are and be ye saved.”**

Saved from the mistakes of the past. Saved from hopelessness and despair and fear of the tomb.

Saved *to* a new life of purpose, meaning, service, hope and witness.

All of this is possible because of the two salient facts about Christ found in today's Gospel. He is both sinless man AND the eternal Son of God.

In closing, the plane we have been on since the beginning of Lent is nearing its destination, soon to come in for a landing. As we prepare to debark, may we join the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian martyr in saying:

*The world behind me, the cross before me.*

*No turning back, no turning back.*