

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Fifth Sunday of Lent for the Closing Mass of the Diocesan Youth Rally for more than 250 young people from around the Diocese, held at Paw Paw High School Saturday, March 21, 2015—

Theme: "I Am Catholic"

My brothers and sisters, it's so good to be with you for this evening's closing Mass as you've come from nearly 20 parishes from around our Diocese. I hope you've had a great day here at the Annual Diocesan Youth Rally.

This is an exciting time of the year for those who are "March Madness" fans---- and especially for Michigan State fans who won in their first round and will play in the 2nd round tomorrow. Go Spartans! Besides that, what a great day to be able to spend together----the first full day of SPRING! To me, spring is the best time of the year. First, winter is over! Second, the temperatures are pleasant, and soon we'll be able to put away the heavy clothes, coats, boots, scarves and gloves. Third, and maybe best, is that the world starts to come back to life! Nature starts to wake up---little flowers start to spout up out of the ground---the trees start to bud---- For those of you who like to plant, it will soon be time to sow the seeds. It's not time yet---it's only time to get ready---to prepare---but soon, it will be the right time.

Jesus talked a lot about when the "right time" was for Him as well. There were many times in the Gospel accounts that we have heard Jesus say that He can't do something because it wasn't the "right time". Do you remember when He and His mother Mary were invited to a wedding feast in Cana and the party ran out of wine? Mary came to Jesus to tell Him and ask Him to do something about it, and do you remember what Jesus' response was: "*It is not yet my hour.*" But in this evening's Gospel passage, we heard Jesus say: "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" And then He went on to talk about planting "grains of wheat".

Maybe it was spring time then as well. Jesus had that image on His mind, as He said: "*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.*" And then He made the application of that image to US! "*Whoever loves His life, loses it, and whoever loses his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.*"

There is something inside each seed that can only reach its full potential if the seed dies. So, Jesus is saying, there is something inside each of us that can only come to life if we 'die to ourselves'.

Let's carry that one step further. Earlier in this evening's Gospel passage, we heard about *"some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast"*. They had obviously heard about Jesus and they wanted to meet Him. So, *"they came to Philip and asked him, 'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'."* And what did Philip do? *"Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew AND Philip went and told Jesus."* That's what we have to do, too! We have to realize that there is something inside each of us that can only reach its full potential if we, like those 'Greeks', go out of our way *"to see Jesus"*. And even more than that, we have to do more than want *"to see Jesus"*; we also need to want to know Him, love Him, and follow Him.

I hope that's what you've been able to be working on today during this Youth Rally. I hope that's what you've been working on doing better at during this Lent--through our prayer, fasting, self-denial, I hope we have a better "view" of Jesus in our lives; a deeper understanding of the Good News of Jesus----and a more realistic understanding of who I am ---- who you are----as a Catholic!

In today's First Reading, the Prophet Jeremiah talked about a "new covenant". It wasn't anything "new" that God was saying; what was "new" was the way God wanted to say it. The previous "covenant" was written on two stone tablets that people had to read and memorize. It was something, in a sense, outside themselves. In this "new covenant" that Jeremiah was talking about, he said that God wanted to *"place My law within them and write it upon their hearts."* And listen to these loving words once again that God speaks: *"I will be their God, and they shall be My people....All from least to greatest shall know Me, says the Lord."*

Our Catholic faith tells us that that is exactly what happens to us on the day of our baptism. When we are baptized into Christ, God "indelibly" marks us as His own, and He gives us His Holy Spirit to live within us forever. Of course, God also gives us the gift of free will, so He doesn't force us to love Him in return----that is always our choice. But God's love is "planted", like a grain of wheat, in our souls. And the only way that "seed of God's Life" can "come alive", or reach its full potential---to bear fruit---is if we choose to give it life by "dying to ourselves" so that God's life can live within us.

Now, that's not an easy thing to do. In fact, our human nature resists that choice. It wasn't an easy choice for Jesus either. Listen to Him once again in this evening's Gospel, right after He says that His "hour"---His time to die---has come: *"I am troubled now, yet what should I say: 'Father, save Me from this hour?' But it was for this very purpose that I came to this hour."* The Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews told us that Jesus really struggled: *"Jesus offered prayers...with loud cries and tears to the One Who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard..."*

My dear young Catholics---if it was difficult for Jesus, we'd be foolish to think that it's not going to be difficult for us. To choose to follow Jesus----to choose to live our lives by Gospel values---to choose to do what's right even if everyone else around us is doing something different---to choose to stand up to defend the gift of human life---to choose to stand up for what is right and just---to choose to live a moral life and to be chaste----to choose to stand up for the right to stand up, and not to be intimidated by anyone who tells us to keep our faith quiet and to ourselves. None of that is easy; all of that takes a lot of courage. But when we choose to follow Jesus, we will find the joy of the "new life" that God wants for each of us---the new life that lives within us.

To you young Catholics, coming from an "experienced Catholic", our Catholic faith is a great gift. It's a gift that gives us the sacraments available to us anytime---especially the Sacrament of Penance where we can go to experience the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus as we confess our sins to the priest; and most especially this Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, where we encounter the real presence of Jesus to be the food we need to keep us spiritually healthy, and to give us the strength to stand up for our faith.

The choices we have to make are not easy ones; but they are extremely important ones. To make the right choice, as painful as it can sometimes be, will most definitely lead us in the right direction, because it is always Jesus----the Way, the Truth, and the Life---who is leading us.

We're on the verge of the holiest week of the year. Holy Week reminds us how deeply Jesus loves each and every one of us. He suffered and died for us. But, as we know, the story doesn't end in the tomb. Two weeks from tomorrow we will be rejoicing in Jesus' glorious resurrection. Jesus' victory over sin and death as we celebrate it on Easter is our victory too!

Dear young Catholics, let Jesus be your spiritual food; let Him be your mercy and the forgiveness of your sins; let Him be your comfort when you feel alone or like you're swimming against the tide for making right choices; let Jesus lead you because He will NEVER lead you astray. And most of all, let your Catholic faith be your strength, and may the Church always be your spiritual family for support, encouragement and direction all the days of your life.

God bless you!