**Sermon Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (St. Polycarp, *Bishop and Martyr*)**

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**Text:** *“So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Genesis 45:3-15)*

Joseph was dead. Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob (surnamed Israel) the patriarch, was dead; and behold, he is alive again. Joseph’s older brothers had given a false report of his death to their father who, holding the bloodstained coat of nobility he’d given his son, was inconsolable. “A foul animal has devoured him! Torn apart, in pieces, is Joseph!” (Gen 37:33) Now, it may be true that Joseph was neither murdered nor devoured. But he was good as dead. He was *karath*, literally “cut off” from his homeland, handed over by his brothers into a kind of living death as a slave and prisoner. Now, in our Old Testament reading, we with Joseph’s guilty brothers behold him alive.

The Joseph narrative being the longest in the book of Genesis, his turbulent life demands our attention. Through all his patient endurance, Joseph became a true “martyr” for the true faith. And to speak of martyrs: today the Church also remembers St. Polycarp of Smyrna, who was burned at the stake in the year 156. The compelling record of this event, titled *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, is also well worth reading by Christians. But before getting too far afield, we must acknowledge that, in no less a sense than St. Polycarp, Joseph of the Old Testament had also undergone martyrdom. Every Christian baptized undergoes a death and rising to new life, a deep descent and exaltation.

Joseph’s trial of faith was not simply his own. I mentioned his father Jacob, who had his heart torn out on the supposed death of Joseph; amazingly, Joseph’s own brothers who bore the responsibility for his hardships also undergo martyrdom. Our text begins with them trembling in the presence of the most powerful man in the world. Joseph as the Grand Vizier of Egypt had on a mere whim had their brother Simeon kept hostage; he accused another with a trumped-up charge of theft; and now Judah, the leader and spokesperson of Jacob’s sons, has just offered to bear the penalty of death in place of his father’s beloved son. Everyone has been through his own personal hell.

Sir Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.” As we bear up with our own trials and tribulations (whether due to ours or another’s guilt), it is easy to glamorize the faithful resistance of Joseph when he was tempted to despair as a slave, and by an adulterous affair. Or the exemplary death of Polycarp under Roman persecution: an ordeal which, I pray, none of us will have to endure. Yet we indeed as Christians are called to endure. As St. Paul wrote the Corinthians, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may endure it.” (1 Cor 10:13) In Holy Baptism to renounce the Devil, and all of his works and all of his ways, etc.

Yet that is only part of the picture. The suffering of the saints of God does not end where our line of personal accountability ends. That, perhaps, is the hardest pill to swallow. We are again, as St. James writes, to remain “steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” (Jas 1:12) Sin is no joke. Not to be missed, however, is where St. Jude exhorts members of the Church to do what is perhaps the most difficult thing a person may be asked: to bear patiently with those who are erring and entangled in sin. “And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.” (Jude 22-23)

Of all that can be gleaned from Joseph’s life, this climactic episode in which he forgives his murderous and deceitful brothers is of chief importance. All has been leading up to this. First he begins speaking to them in their native tongue, thereby revealing that he is their brother Joseph, presumed dead. He then beckons them twice to “approach.” He thrice assures them of God’s merciful hand in everything they endured: the deceit, the enslavement, the famine, the horror. “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.” (Gen 45:4-5) The first life to be preserved, of course, is that of his own brothers, sins forgiven. The next is that of his old and frail father Jacob who, deprived of two beloved sons, was despairing of life.

The self-sacrificial love, we may say the unconditional love which Jacob bore his brothers (“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?” [50:19]) is anchored in the all-availing mercy extended us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Jesus is a true descendant of Judah, who offered his life as a ransom for his brother. But Judah never died in place of another; and that is neither our call as followers of Christ. None of us can bear the sins of the world, leave alone expunge our own sins. This past week, an upstanding Christian brother consoled me with these words: “It isn’t easy, though, we forgive because Christ forgave us so much more.” Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a fact. Just like the fact that Jesus was dead – and behold, he is alive; death no longer has dominion over him.

The life preserved through the trials of Joseph and Judah – that is to say, the sufferings of Jesus prefigured in them – is our own. Before Christ Paul declares us “dead in our trespasses,” “carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:2, 5). But like the Prodigal Son, we who were once dead are alive again through the power of Jesus’ resurrection. As Bl. Dr. Martin Luther warns us, each of us experiences temptation in a different way: some of us through indulgence in sinful pleasures or, conversely, some physical impairment; others through the world, its wealth, and its deceit; and others of us, through the devil’s torments. He called it *Anfechtung*. It causes us to tremble: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24-25)

Jesus’ reconciling work and resurrection alone gives us the strength to resist temptation – to pray “Lead us not into temptation” and to firmly believe that “although we are attacked by these things (the devil, the world, and our sinful nature), we will finally overcome them and win the victory.” So, my fellow redeemed in Christ, as each of us departs to face our own particular martyrdom in the world, it seems fitting to close with these words from St. Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians:

Let us, therefore, hold steadfastly and unceasingly to our hope and the guarantee of our righteousness, who is Christ Jesus, who ‘bore our sins in his own body upon the tree,’ ‘who committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth’; instead, for our sakes he endured all things, in order that we might live in him. Let us, therefore, be imitators of his patient endurance, and if we should suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him. For this is the example he set for us in his own person, and this is what we have believed.