

# FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

## St. John 8:1-11

This, the fifth Sunday of Lent, is traditionally known as Passion Sunday and the beginning of the two weeks before Easter known as Passiontide. It was common practice that the silver and gold candlesticks and crucifixes would be replaced with wooden ones and the violet of the vestments replaced with a blood red known as Passiontide red. Whereas from this Sunday we continue the custom of veiling the Cross and images of the Saints, it was the custom in the Middle Ages that everything was veiled from the very beginning of Lent. Even the Book of Gospels which bears images of our Lord and the Saints was veiled.

This custom of veiling has been practiced for the past 1,400 years, beginning in France in the seventh century. At first the veils were made of a white linen but later the practice of coloured or painted veils was introduced. In the twelfth century the custom arose of veiling the altar and the Priest during Mass, much like the Orthodox do with the iconostasis or screen bearing numerous icons which stands before the altar. These veils were very large and hung from the ceiling covering most of the sanctuary. They were hung from the first Sunday of Lent until the Wednesday of Holy Week. Only on Sundays, on feast days, at funerals, and on certain solemn occasions like an ordination would the veil be removed. On all other days the veil remained closed and opened only when at the Mass the Priest would raise the Host and the Chalice so that the people could adore briefly the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

The veiling of Crosses and of images is practiced because Lent and Passiontide have a character of penance and grief and therefore decoration in the church is inappropriate. Moreover these veils draw us ever deeper into a sense of penance and grief so that, by the absence of these symbols of our salvation we behold their greater glory at Easter when the veils are lifted. These

veils are also a symbol of the life to come when Christ will return in glory. We call this the “apocalypse”, and the word apocalypse literally means the “lifting of the veil”. In this life the glory of God is veiled and made known only in signs and symbols whereas in the life to come this veil will be lifted and we will behold God and His Angels and Saints in all their glory.

At Easter, when these earthly veils are lifted, it will show to us that Christ now again stands before us in the unveiled splendour of His eternal glory, that He has opened up the heavens for us and taken away the blindness of the heart from us, which had made it impossible for us to understand the mystery of His Passion.