

5th Sunday of Lent - B

Note: The readings given for Cycle A may be used in place of the Cycle B readings.

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Jeremiah 31:31-34

For nearly seventy-five years after the death of Isaiah no great prophet arose in Judah. It seemed as though the work of the religious leaders of the eighth century B.C. had been in vain. During the long and wicked reign of King Manasseh (693-639 B.C.), son and successor of King Hezekiah, idolatrous worship was established more firmly than ever, and the morals of the people sank to their lowest ebb. The prophets of Yahweh who dared to raise their voices in protest and warning were either silenced or brutally murdered. It was only after a change for the better had been inaugurated under the successors of Manasseh, that the “men of God” again came to the front, and a second golden age of Hebrew prophecy began. It is the age of Jeremiah and Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk, Ezekiel and Daniel. The greatest of these, and at the same time the most Christlike of all the prophets, was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah came from a priestly family whose estates lay in Anathth, a town in the tribe of Benjamin, about two miles northeast of Jerusalem. He received his call as a young man in 626 B.C. (the thirteenth year of the reign of king Josiah). He warned and admonished kings, priests, and people that they were bringing disaster on the nation because they would not live according to the covenant that they had with Yahweh. The very institutions of Judah, the Temple and sacrifices, had become corrupt because they were now being used as an excuse for breaking the covenant: for not treating each other fairly; for exploiting the stranger, the orphan and the widow; for shedding innocent blood; for following alien gods. Therefore, Yahweh would destroy the Temple as He destroyed Shiloh; He does not want their holocausts but adherence to the way of life He had marked out for them. Such preaching earned for Jeremiah the hatred of the people, priests and kings, who persecuted him. Like Christ, he preached against the established order, stood up for justice for the poor, the widow and the orphan, and was persecuted by those to whom he came to preach. In the end he was carried off to Egypt (about 680 B.C.) Where according to Hebrew legend, he was stoned to death.

Our reading for today has been called “Jeremiah’s Spiritual Testament.” His entire message is condensed in these few words. This reading is also the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament; it comprises Hebrews 8:8-12.

³¹ The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant

This is the only time the term “new covenant” is used in the Old Testament.

with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

The Davidic kingdom. Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) went their separate ways after the reign of king Solomon (930 B.C.). This is a promised of the restored Davidic kingdom which God had said would last forever.

³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant

The covenant at Mount Sinai where the ten commandments were given.

and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD.

No longer father, but master. They are now slaves without an inheritance, rather than sons.

³³ But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,

“After those days” is a frequently used expression by Jeremiah – it indicates a sort of rupture in the course of Israel’s history through the wonderful intervention of Yahweh.

says the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts;

The Old Covenant of Sinai was written on stone tablets (Exodus 31:8). The New Covenant, which fulfills the old one, is to be internal and loving (see Ezekiel 36:26).

I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This is covenant language; it will no longer be a master - slave relationship, it is to be a family relationship once again with God as the Father. This is a common expression in the Old Testament as God, again and again, reminds the Israelites that the original intention was that they be children, not slaves.

³⁴ No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the LORD.

In this new era of the New Covenant, intermediaries such as Moses, the Levitical priesthood, and the prophets will be useless; Yahweh will intervene directly and they will be able to recognize God in every action and situation. They will have a different life attitude because the very inner nature of humanity is created anew (we must remember that for the Hebrew, the “heart” refers to the center of human intelligence and willpower).

All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

When sin is forgiven by God, it is forgotten as well. God does not bear a grudge.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 5:7-9

The identity of the author of Hebrews is unknown. With the exception of 1 John, it is the only New Testament epistle that begins without a greeting which mentions the writer's name. Its ascription to Saint Paul goes back at least to the end of the second century in the Church of Alexandria. According to Eusebius (a fourth century historian), it was accepted as Saint Paul's work by Saint Clement. Saint Clement believed that Saint Paul had written it in Hebrew for Hebrews and that Saint Luke had translated it into Greek.

The epistle to the Hebrews demonstrates that the Old Covenant, specifically the worship of the Old Covenant, has been superseded by the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ. It has been postulated that this letter to the Hebrews was addressed to former Jewish priests who had converted to Christianity. Today's reading comes from the section of the letter which contrasts Jesus to the High Priest.

⁷ In the days when he was in the flesh,

The time of Jesus' mortal life, when He lived in the sphere of the flesh.

he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death,

A reference to Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemani (Mark 14:35).

and he was heard because of his reverence.

Although Jesus suffered a physical death on the cross, He also was resurrected because physical death had no power over Him. Levitical priests were prevented from remaining in office by death and also by an upper age limit of fifty. Jesus' priesthood is eternal, he is of the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6 – the verse immediately preceding our reading of today).

⁸ Son though he was,

The sacred author considers Jesus' sonship in two ways: He became Son when exalted; and He always was Son because he existed with the Father even before He appeared on earth.

he learned obedience from what he suffered;

The learning-through-suffering motif is common in Greek literature but here, Romans 5:19, and Philippians 2:8 are the only places in the New Testament where the obedience of Christ in His passion is explicitly mentioned.

⁹ and when he was made perfect,

Through Jesus' obedience He was brought to the full moral perfection of His humanity.

he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Jesus' obedience leads to His priestly consecration, which in turn qualifies Him to save those who are obedient to Him. The salvation that Jesus brings His followers is eternal because it is based on His eternal priesthood. It is eternal because it belongs to the heavenly sphere, which is permanent, as opposed to the transitory realities of earth.

Gospel - John 12:20-33

Saint John had a clear purpose in mind when he wrote his gospel: "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). He seeks to strengthen the faith of those early Christians in the young churches (congregations) of Asia Minor, who are threatened by the latent danger of going astray and even falling into doctrinal error about who Jesus Christ is and what is the true story of His life. Saint John goes straight to the point: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God made man.

Our reading today occurs during that first Holy Week – Jesus has come to Jerusalem for His passion, death and resurrection. The verses immediately preceding this reading describe Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; He has ridden into town like a king with the waving of palm branches and cries of joy.

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast.

These are Gentiles, non-Jews.

²¹ They came to Philip,

The name "Philip" means "lover of horses." Both Philip and Andrew have Greek names and may have understood Greek. It would be natural for the Greeks to seek out someone who would understand their culture and language to act as an intermediary.

who was from Bethsaida in Galilee,

Bethsaida means "house of fishing." Technically, it is in Gaulanitis which adjoins Galilee, but the Jews of Bethsaida were considered Galileans.

and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew;

The name "Andrew" means "manly." It may be that they consulted with each other because there is no precedent for Jesus dealing with Gentiles.

then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them,

The "them" is Philip and Andrew. There is no indication that the Gentiles were with them but it

would make these Gentiles the first fruits of the spread of the Christian faith in the Greek speaking world.

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Now that the week of His passion has started, Jesus again begins to explain what is to happen to Him.

²⁴ Amen, amen, I say to you, 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.

If it is thought to be strange that He must die in order to bring life, remember that this paradox already exists in nature. The grain of wheat left to itself produces nothing – only when it appears to have died and has been buried does it bring forth life, in far greater abundance.

²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it,

Selfishness, man's false love for himself that will not permit him to sacrifice himself, ends in destroying him. Only by treating his life as worthless from a this-worldly view does man gain the only life that really counts.

and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.

In Semitic usage, "hates" means "loves less."

²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.

Service is a sacrifice of self. The principle of sacrifice is the explanation of Christ's life and if you wish to be His follower, you must walk in His footsteps and sacrifice self. If you serve, you minister to another ("as you did it to the least of your brethren . . ."). The imitation of Christ is the Christian standard of perfection.

²⁷ "I am troubled now.

In the face of an imminent and cruel death, Jesus can and does feel anguish.

Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.

Jesus asks the question and immediately answers it by submitting to the will of His Father. The value of the sacrifice is in the readiness to offer it.

²⁸ Father, glorify your name."

This is Jesus' final answer to this crisis of spirit – it is wholehearted acceptance of the Father's will. Recall that in Semitic usage, "name" is synonymous to "person." Faith is not simply acceptance of a proposition, but a commitment to a person.

Then a voice came from heaven,

This observation is unique to John's gospel. It brings to mind Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11) and His transfiguration (Mark 9:7).

"I have glorified it and will glorify it again."

This is not a reference to any single event, but to the entire life work and teaching of Jesus, all of which have been "signs" of the glorification that is to come.

²⁹ The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

Like the Israelites at Mount Sinai, if they were not attuned to the Word of God, they didn't understand it.

³⁰ Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come for my sake but for yours."

Jesus' private agony is a public manifestation of His obedient service.

³¹ Now is the time of judgment on this world;

The time has come for Christ's exaltation, it is time for that judgement of which He has continually spoken (John 3:17-19; 5:22-30).

now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

This is the paradox of Christ's exaltation. It will appear that He has been defeated by this world, but in reality the power of Satan will be broken. John doesn't say that Satan will be destroyed, but that he will no longer be the ruler of the world except to the extent that man's evil dispositions permit. Satan has no power except that which we give him.

³² And when I am lifted up from the earth,

The crowd understands rightly that this refers to His death, but they do not understand that it also refers to His glorification.

I will draw everyone to myself." ³³ He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

The death of Christ makes possible the exercise of His will of universal salvation.