

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 31:31-34
<i>Response</i>	Create a clean heart in me, O God.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 5:7-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Whoever serves me must follow me, says the Lord; and where I am, there also will my servant be.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 12:20-33

The Fifth Sunday of Lent for Year B continues our journey toward the paschal mystery of Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, and it does so with yet another passage from the Gospel of John. And this passage might not be as familiar or as famous to people because it's only in John, but it's really significant in the arc of the narrative within John's gospel. And that is Jesus's final public statement before his passion begins in John 12, it's the reference to Jesus' hour having come. Before I read the gospel, just a quick side note on that. So whenever you look through the Gospel of John and read it from beginning to end, one of the distinctive aspects of his gospel is going to be an emphasis on the hour of Jesus. So Jesus is going to frequently refer to his passion and death and resurrection as his hour, even though it takes place over the course, obviously, of more than a day. He will use this terminology of the hour to refer to the significance of this redemptive moment within salvation history. And so the gospel for this week, on the cusp of the final week of Lent which will be of course Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, the last Sunday of Lent before Palm Sunday, is going to be the last words of Jesus during his public ministry from the Gospel of John. So that's what we're reading this week and it's from John 12:20-33. It's kind of a long passage, but it's definitely worth reading carefully and closely. So let's just walk through that together and we'll try to unpack it. In John 12:20 we read these words:

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Beth-saida in Galilee, and said to

him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him. "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? `Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name."

And then something interesting happens here. This is one of the three times that the Father speaks in all of the public ministry of Jesus. You've got the baptism, you've got the Transfiguration, and then you have this final word from the Father in heaven. And this is only in John the father says this:

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die.¹

Okay, so not a very familiar passage maybe to many of us, but very important for John's gospel. A couple of points about it, first, notice the context. The context here is the Feast of Passover which, as I've mentioned on previous videos, was a pilgrimage festival. It took place in the spring when hundreds of thousands of Jews would come together in the city of Jerusalem to celebrate the feast in the Temple. And in this case, John says that there were also some who went up to the feast who were Greeks, right. Now in context here this appears to mean pagans, in other words, non-Jews who believed in God, believed in the God of the Jews, and even wanted to celebrate and worship the God of the Jews alongside the Jews. So in this

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

case what happens is, notice they come to Philip who is from Beth-saida in Galilee and say that they want to see Jesus. And then Philip takes them to Andrew and Andrew tells Jesus about it.

Now what's interesting about that is when it says that there were some Greeks, they just so happen to go to the two of Jesus' disciples who have Greek names, right. So Fílippos is a very Greek name, it's not a Semitic name, it's not a Hebrew or Aramaic name; and Andréas, which is the Greek for Andrew, is also a very Greek name. And if you recall, Jesus' disciples, the bulk of them, were from Galilee, which was called Galilee of the Gentiles. There was a lot of Greek speaking influence, a lot of pagan influence in the Galilee in which Jesus grew up. Sometimes you'll hear people suggest that the Galilee in the north was completely Jewish, but we know now from archaeology, as well as from other evidence from the First Century A.D., that in fact the Hellenistic influence was very strong in the north in Galilee. And you can even see that in the names of a couple of Jesus' disciples. So remember here, Andrew and Peter are brothers. Peter's name was Simon, which is a very Jewish name, Simeon, but Andrew's name Andréas is a Greek name. So you can already see, in other words, some of the Greek influence within the very family of St. Peter himself. So I don't think it's a coincidence here that the Greeks go to Andrew and Philip. In fact, I would suggest, and some scholars have suggested this as well, that evidently Andrew and Philip can speak Greek well, and so these Greek speaking outsiders, these foreigners, people who are coming in from the outside to celebrate Passover, find the disciples of Jesus who speak their own language and then use them as kind of go-betweens between them and Jesus, you know, intercessors on their behalf asking to see Jesus.

Now with all that in mind, what's the most significant point here is that the second Jesus hears that some Greeks are looking for him, he declares 'now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' Now in order to feel the kind of magnitude of that declaration you need to keep in mind that for the first 11 chapters of John's gospel, Jesus has been saying over and over again 'my hour has not yet come' or 'the hour is coming' in the future tense. So think here about the Wedding at Cana, when Mary invites Jesus to solve the problem of the wine. What does he say? My hour has not yet come. So for the first 11 chapters he's stressing that the hour is something in the future, but the second that the Greeks start looking for him he says it's time; the hour of his passion, the hour the Last Supper, the hour of the

redemption of the world. And so you gotta ask yourself here, why does Jesus say that the hour has come once the Greeks come looking for him? Well I would suggest that Jesus, like other Jews in the First Century A.D., would've known that in the Old Testament, in the Jewish Bible, the prophets had said over and over again that one of the signs of the age of salvation, one of the signs of the future time of the Messiah, would be the conversion of the Gentiles, would be the fact that the Gentiles would start looking to worship the one God of Israel. The book of Zechariah for example describes the Gentiles 'grabbing onto the coat of a Jew and asking them bring us to Jerusalem, bring us to your God.' Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 will talk about the fact that not only will the word of God go forth from Zion, but the nations will come streaming to Jerusalem to begin worshipping the one true God. So what Jesus sees in these Greeks coming to look for him is a kind of sign that the age of salvation has now come, because the Gentiles are actually starting to convert and he hasn't even gone to the cross yet, right. So once they do this he points forward to the time of his glorification. That's another technical term that you see Jesus use in the Gospel of John. In the Old Testament the glorification of God would be a way of speaking about worshipping the Lord, to give glory to the Lord. In this case, Jesus uses the term glorify as a technical term for his passion and death. So that his passion and death is in a real sense going to be the ultimate act of praise and glory to God the Father. That's what he's going to be doing on the cross.

And in order to illustrate that he then gives this mysterious parable, a kind of riddle about the seed, the grain of wheat, that falls to the earth. And he says unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit. So what's he talking about here? Well basically he's drawing an analogy between the planting of a seed of wheat and his own passion and death. So Jesus himself is like the grain of wheat and just as you would put a grain of wheat into the soil in order for it to bear fruit, you've got to bury it in the earth. So too Jesus is going to have to die and be buried before he can rise again and bring the fruit of everlasting life. So it's a kind of interesting analogy here because we moderns don't usually think of a seed as dying, but Jesus is drawing that analogy out in order to get you to start thinking about his own passion, death and resurrection. And if you have any doubts about that he follows up this analogy with a more explicit declaration where he says 'whoever loves his life is going to lose it, but whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' Now what does that mean, hate his life? This is not in the way we would mean if someone said 'I hate my life'

you know. That would mean that you're despaired, that you just don't have any happiness or joy in your life. That's not what Jesus means. You'll recall in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says 'unless a man hates his father and mother he cannot be my disciple.' The word hatred in the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy for example, can be used as a technical term for separating yourself from someone or a divorce, right. So it's a kind of detachment, it's hyperbolic, it's exaggerated, right. Jesus isn't actually commanding us to hate our father and mother. What he's saying is if you love your father and mother more than me then you're not going to be worthy of me. You have to be willing to detach from your family and attach to me. You have to make me the number one priority in your life. And so the same things true here. In other words, whoever clings to his life in this world and who isn't willing to lay down their life, they're not going to have eternal life.

And Jesus is going to be the supreme example of that because he's not going to cling to his earthly life. He's not going to cling to his human life. He's going to willingly lay down his life on the cross. And it's precisely by being willing to die that he's going to also be able to be raised again, and that he will enter into the eternal life of a kingdom of God and into life with the father in his ascension. So he's trying to teach us about the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection. And he's using imagery here both from the wheat but also just from the language of losing your life to try to teach that message to the disciples, to try to open up the mystery of the cross to them. And then you'll see there in verse 26, he says 'if anyone serves me he must follow me, for where I am there my servant will be also.' This is basically the equivalent of what Jesus says in the Synoptics: whoever wants to be my disciple, take up your cross and follow me. So you'll see this over and over in the Gospel of John. Jesus will say similar things to what you find in the Synoptics, but they're like in a different key, they use different images. In John's gospel it's really distinctive and memorable precisely for that reason.

Alright then, so in the next verses we come to the hour of Jesus. And this is an interesting section here because it almost reminds you of the Garden of Gethsemane, except the emphasis is different. What he's saying here is my hour has come and I'm not going to say father save me from this hour, I'm going to say father glorify your name, right. So on the cusp of his passion here, he is declaring that he's not going to avoid the hour, he's going to accept it and in that act of pronouncing his acceptance of the hour, God does something really unique in the gospels, he

speaks. This is something he only does three times, as I mentioned earlier. And so he says these words, 'I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.' Now what does that mean? What is God the Father referring to here? He doesn't say a lot in the Gospels. This is my beloved son, in whom I'm well pleased. This is my beloved Son, listen to him. But what does this mean? I have glorified it and I will glorify it again. Well remember what I said about glorification in the Gospel of John. Glorification is always a technical term for giving glory to God, especially through the passion and death of Christ. So what most scholars think is that this is an allusion to the two most important moments in salvation history: the incarnation and the passion. Kind of like the two pillars of the creed, Jesus' birth and his death, Christmas and Easter, in other words. Because if you go back to the beginning of the Gospel of John, when it's reflecting on the mystery of Christmas, it says 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we had beheld his glory', right. So there's glory in the fact that the Son of God, the eternal Son of God, has become a man and dwelt among us on Earth. But the other element of glory is going to be that the same Son of God is going to lay down his life. He's going to lay down the human body that he's taken up in the incarnation, and he's going to allow himself to be put to death, so that he might be raised up and so that he might give us the gift of everlasting life. So it's kinda neat here, well I guess it's more than neat, it's profound, right, that the Father refers to the mystery of Christmas and the mystery of Easter as these two moments of his glorification, where God is revealing his glory to us through these great mysteries.

And I love here how the crowd, you know, the voice comes from heaven and obviously some of them it's audible to them, they can hear it but they don't understand it. They think oh well it must have thundered or something right, they can't interpret it. And others are saying, oh no, no, no, an angel's talking to him. So there's some kind of audible dimension to this voice but not everybody understands exactly what's happened. So Jesus here kind of goes further to say, 'look the voice, the sound, this has come for your sake.' In other words, this isn't news to him, he knows what his mission is. But the voice has come for the sake of the people around him so that they might know this, and this is a really powerful verse, that now is the judgment of this world and now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.

Now this is really significant. What does Jesus mean by now the ruler of this world, or some translations have it, the prince of this world shall be cast out? Well

this is another aspect in John that's distinctive. If you compare the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke to John, one of the differences you'll notice is where as Jesus is constantly performing exorcisms in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he never performs a single exorcism in the Gospel of John, except for one and that is the exorcism of the cross, right. So in John's gospel Jesus is revealing to us that the cross isn't just a sacrifice like the Passover or the day of atonement, it's also a kind of great exorcism. Because by laying down his life he's going to take the power of death away from the devil and thereby cast out the devil, in a sense, take away his power, as he says here, 'the prince of this world's going to be cast out.' And when Jesus refers to the prince of this world he's talking about the fact that after the fall in Genesis 2 and 3, Satan has a certain dominion over the sons of men, over human beings, and over the world as a whole. And so by going to the cross, one of the aspects of the cross, the mystery of the cross is that Jesus robs Satan of that power. He takes the curse of sin and death upon himself and thereby, in a sense, disarms the devil, right. So I think one of those classic examples of how John's doing the same thing as the synoptic Gospels, but in his own way he's giving us teachings of Jesus that are distinctive, that are unique. And in this case he's revealing to us that Jesus himself saw his cross as like the great cosmic exorcism of the world. It's a powerful way to think about it.

Alright, then finally, one last point here. We've seen the imagery of exaltation of Jesus being lifted up earlier in the gospel, in John 3, when Jesus used the image of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness as a kind of type or prefiguration of his crucifixion. Well Jesus takes that same terminology of being lifted up to describe his death in John 12 when he says, 'when I am lifted up from the Earth I will draw all men to myself.' Now that's a fascinating image because as I just mentioned a few minutes ago, the prophets, over and over again, they proclaim that one day Jerusalem, the city, would draw all men to itself. The Gentiles would pilgrimage from all around the world to come to this glorious city of Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem with its new temple, and to worship God in that way. But now what Jesus does is he takes the image of everyone pilgrimaging to the temple, to the new temple, and he puts himself at the center of that image. And he says, 'when I'm lifted up I'm going to draw all human beings, all people, all things to myself.' What is he doing by saying this? Well he's revealing, yet again, he is the true temple, he is the true dwelling place of God. And the mysterious thing about this is that, the temple that he's talking about is the temple of his body crucified. In other words,

it's the cross that is going to become the mechanism of salvation, not just for the Jews, but for the Greeks, for the Gentiles, who've begun to seek after him on this last day of his public ministry. So very powerful image there. A very powerful passage in John that really is just rich with all kinds of insights into the paschal mystery of his death and his resurrection.

Now with that said, we can turn back to the Old Testament reading for this week. The Old Testament reading for the Fifth Sunday in Lent is from the prophets. So you might remember that last Sunday what we saw was the Church giving us a passage from the destruction and rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. And I mentioned to you that that was the final chapter in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the Christian Bible doesn't end there, the Christian Old Testament ends with the prophets. And so in this case, as the Church is journeying through salvation history with the first readings for each Sunday of Lent, it's fitting that on the Fifth Sunday of Lent she would take a passage from the prophets that doesn't look back to salvation history in the Old Testament, but forward to the New Testament. And this may be one of the most important prophecies in the Old Testament. It's Jeremiah 31, his prophecy of the new covenant, right. Why do I say it's so important? Well because although the new covenant is at the center of our faith as Catholics, it's only actually mentioned once in the Old Testament explicitly. So that is in Jeremiah 31, so we want to pay attention to this section. It's very important, it says this, in chapter 31 verse 31-34, the prophet Jeremiah said:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Alright, so notice a few things about this. First, the very language of a covenant is important. If you'll recall in the Old Testament, a covenant was a sacred family bond between God and humanity, between God and his chosen people. It's frequently used with the image of a marriage, right. That God gives himself to his people and he asks his people to love him in return, to be faithful to him. Not to chase after other gods or worldly goods but to give him their hearts, and their minds, and their lives, and their love. So God here is saying through Jeremiah that in light of the fact that his people have broken the old covenant, right, through idolatry above all, because that's what Jeremiah is facing in his day, God's not going to abandon them. That one day he's going to come and he's going to make a new covenant. He's going to establish a new relationship and it's not going to be like the old covenant. Primarily because whereas the old covenant, think of Moses here, was written on tablets of stone like the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus 20, this new covenant is actually going to be interior. It's going to be written on the tablet, so to speak, of the human heart of his people. And that through this new covenant he's actually going to give them the grace to both know him and also to do his will. There's going to be a supernatural grace here. Where he says, 'I will put my law within them, I will write it upon their hearts.' And this new law is tied, note here, at the very end there to the forgiveness of sins: 'I forgive their iniquity, I'll remember their sin no more.'

So if you were a First Century Jew waiting for the promises of God to come to fulfillment, the way you would know that the new covenant had been established is when the forgiveness of sins took place. That's why it's so significant for us as Catholics that at the Last Supper Jesus explicitly links his actions with the establishment of a "new covenant" in his blood, through which he will pour out his life for the forgiveness of sins, right. I mean any one of the apostles, if they knew the prophets, would have recognized at the Last Supper that Jesus was fulfilling the new covenant that Jeremiah had spoken of hundreds and hundreds of years before Jesus came onto the scene. So a very important prophecy. And on this Fifth Sunday of Lent the Church gives us this prophecy because we are preparing for holy week, in which Jesus is actually going to inaugurate the new covenant above all on Holy Thursday, on the night of the Last Supper.

Alright, and with that in mind, a final couple points here about the psalm for the day. In this case it's a psalm we'll see over and over again on Sundays, but you can

never really get tired of it, it's the penitential psalm, Psalm 51. And you might think, why does the Church always put this before us? Well it is because we always sin, right, and this is the psalm of penitent sinners. So if you're a penitent sinner, this is the one for you. And in this case, though, the Church juxtaposes it with the prophecy from Jeremiah because it actually uses the image of asking God for a clean heart. So just as Jeremiah said that God would one day write the law in our hearts, so now psalm 51 has as its refrain:

Create in me a clean heart, O God

Have mercy on me, restore to me the joy of salvation, give me a clean heart. What's a clean heart? Well for most of us we would think, oh well that means your cholesterol levels are good or something like that, your arteries are clear. But obviously this is a metaphor for a heart that is clean from sin, right. A heart that is not bound by or weakened by sin, and defilement, and impurity, right. The kind of iniquity that the Israelites were really struggling with at the time that Jeremiah had prophesied that one day God would give them new hearts, that he would write his law within their hearts. So in this sense, what the Church is doing here is preparing us to ask for the very thing Christ is going to give us during holy week at the Last Supper, but then above all obviously through his passion, his death, and his resurrection.

And speaking of holy week and the Last Supper, I'd like to close just with a brief quotation from one of the Church Fathers from the living tradition. This is from St. Irenaeus of Lyons. He was a Second Century Church Father, one of the first truly great theologians in the history of the Church, after the time of the New Testament. And in one of his writings he expounds on Jesus' use of the imagery of a grain of wheat falling into the earth. And what Irenaeus says here is fascinating, he says not only is that image of the wheat a kind of analogy for the cross, but that it's a Eucharistic image as well. Because what do you make with wheat? You make bread. Listen to the words of Irenaeus:

“And just as a cutting from the vine planted in the ground fructifies in its season, or as *a corn of wheat falling into the earth* and becoming decomposed, rises with manifold increase by the Spirit of God, who contains all things, and then, through the wisdom of God, serves for the use of men, and having received the Word of God, *becomes the Eucharist*, which is the

body and blood of Christ; *so also our bodies*, being nourished by it, and deposited in the earth, and suffering decomposition there, *shall rise at their appointed time*, the Word of God granting them resurrection to the glory of God...”²

It's an awesome image, right. Think about what he's doing there. First, he's making a connection between the grain of wheat and the Eucharist, right. So in so far as the grain of wheat symbolizes Christ being buried and then rising again, it also points to the fact that Christ comes to us in the Eucharist. Because he is not just the one who goes to Calvary and dies and rises again, he's also the one who comes to us in his glorified, resurrected body, in his crucified and risen body every time the mass is celebrated. In a sense, every time the mass is celebrated, the mystery of the grain of wheat that fell into the Earth, died, and then bore much fruit is made real, it's made present, it's made true in our very midst through the celebration of the mass. But then Irenaeus takes it even further, because he says if the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ and we receive it, then that means that our bodies as well one day will be laid in the earth like grains of wheat, and then we too will rise again like Christ in order to bear fruit for eternal life. So the analogy there of the grain of wheat becomes a really powerful, powerful mystery that points not just to Christ's passion and death, but to the mystery of the Eucharist, and to the mystery of our own resurrection from the dead on the final day.

² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.2.3.; trans. ANF