

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 31:31-34
<i>Response</i>	Create in me a clean heart, 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>	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.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 12:20-33

The fifth Sunday in Lent for year B gives us a second reading that's a very short passage but a very important passage from the letter to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 5:7-9, there's a short vignette — a short little passage — about the sufferings and the prayers of Jesus that has some curious elements to it that are going to require some explanation. So I'll just read it briefly and then we'll try to unpack its meaning. So the reading for today says this:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him...¹

So, a couple things about this passage that stand out immediately. First, notice the expression:

In the days of his flesh...

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.

So this is one of the few instances in the letter to the Hebrews — and in fact, in the letters of the New Testament — in which there's an explicit reference made to the public ministry and life of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels. So one of the things you'll notice if you read the letters of Paul or through the Catholic epistles in the New Testament, in letter of the Hebrews, is that there are very few references to the sayings and deeds of Jesus that are recorded in the four Gospels.

So you'll have Paul, for example — 1 Corinthians 11 mentions the words of Institution at the Last Supper. You have Paul elsewhere mention Jesus' saying about a laborer deserving his wages. Hebrews 5:7 is one of those few fleeting references to the life of Jesus in the letters of the New Testament. And so usually they refer to the Passion, Death, and Resurrection. The Paschal Mystery is kind of often the center of the apostolic preaching and proclamation in the apostolic letters of the New Testament. But in this case, we see Hebrews 5 referring to:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death...

Now what is that referring to? Virtually unanimous among commentators that the letter to the Hebrews here is alluding to the prayers of Jesus in Gethsemane at the beginning of His Passion and on the eve of His death on Calvary on Good Friday. So you can imagine why then, on the fifth Sunday of Lent, the Church might for her second reading (which is taken from the letters) choose one of the few passages in the letters — indeed, the only passage in the letters — that refers explicitly to the sufferings of Jesus in Gethsemane that prepare for His death on Good Friday. It makes a lot of sense.

Now, with that in mind, it is fascinating, if you look at the synoptic accounts of Jesus in Gethsemane — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — we see the imagery of Him kneeling, praying in anguish, and in Luke's Gospel even sweating blood. But Hebrews 5 here adds one other element, which is that He not only prayed and supplicated the Father with loud cries, he also adds "tears." And I just think it's a fascinating window into the agony of Jesus. Because if you look at the Gospels, Jesus doesn't...He weeps very seldom, but He weeps at significant moments. So He weeps over the city of Jerusalem:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. (Matthew 23:37-38)

So He weeps over the rejection of Him by the city of Jerusalem, then He weeps over the death of Lazarus in the Gospel of John, and then here according to the letter to the Hebrews — if Hebrews is referring to Gethsemane — He also wept during His agony and His prayers in Gethsemane. That’s the second thing.

A third element of the text that’s worth highlighting is that it says that He prayed:

...to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. (Hebrews 5:7d-e)

Now you might think, “I thought Jesus asked the Father in Gethsemane”:

“Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” (Luke 22:42)

So you might think Jesus *wasn't* heard, because He was arrested, tried, charged for blasphemy, and then executed and asphyxiated as a criminal on Good Friday. But Hebrews appears here to have in mind the idea that He’s saved from death and heard in His prayers through the Resurrection. Because although He does suffer death, He will ultimately be delivered from death and the power of death through the Resurrection. So that’s how I would interpret that verse here.

Now the next thing that Hebrews says here is fascinating. It says:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him... (Hebrews 5:8-9)

Now that's the part of the line, especially when it's read in the lectionary, read in the liturgy, that I know strikes most people as problematic. Because for Hebrews to say that Jesus was made perfect, makes it sound like it's implying that He was imperfect — that there was some flaw or some fault or some imperfection about Him that was corrected somehow through His Passion. So is that what the letter to the Hebrews is saying? Well, you can probably detect from my tone that the answer is no. But how would you explain that? So let me try to say what being made perfect does *not* mean and then what it does mean as well, to try to clarify.

Okay, so the first thing that we want to say here is that when the letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus was made perfect, it does *not* mean that He was a sinner or that He had any fault or imperfection. And you can know that by going back a few chapters in Hebrews itself, because of all the letters in the New Testament, Hebrews is the most explicit about the fact that Jesus has no sin. So in Hebrews 4:15, it says:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

So Hebrews is very, very clear about the fullness of Jesus' humanity. It is a full human nature. He does have limitations, He does have weaknesses — the most obvious being that He can suffer...but there's no sin. He can even experience external temptation (like all human beings do) but without sinning. So Hebrews is very clear about the sinlessness of Jesus. So that's not what we're talking about here when it says that He was made perfect or that He learned obedience through what He suffered.

So what *are* we talking about? Well, this is a fascinating example of why knowing Greek is very helpful. And in this case, the Greek word for “being made perfect” or to perfect, *teleoō*, is a word that has a wide range of meanings. And in order to determine the meaning, you have to look at the context. So in this case, it's very fascinating that if you go back to the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures known as the Septuagint, one of the most prominent uses for the word *teleoō* (to make perfect) is not — as we would commonly think of it — to be made flawless.

Although, it can be used that way. It can be made...perfect can mean “complete,” “whole,” “without flaw.”

It can mean all those things, but one specific meaning that it has in Jewish Scripture is to be ordained a priest. It’s the word for “ordination.” On the day of a priest’s ordination, they are perfected, consecrated to God and to His service.

So for example, let me just show you here...in the book of Leviticus 8:31,33. In the Greek Septuagint — this is a parallel — Moses is giving instructions to Aaron and his sons for how they will be ordained. So if you’ve ever been to a priestly ordination today, if you’ve ever been to the liturgy of a priest ordination, you’ll know it’s a pretty elaborate ceremony. There are lots of symbols and rites involved. It’s pretty momentous and solemn and fascinating. It’s just a beautiful, beautiful ceremony. Well, Leviticus 8, if you were wondering, is what the ordination service of an Old Testament priest looked like. So if you want to go back and see the details of it, you can read the whole chapter. But in that chapter in the Greek translation, verses 31 and 33, this is what it says:

And Moses spoke to Aaron and his sons: “...You shall not go out of the entrance of the tent of testimony for seven days, until *the time of your fulfillment* (lit., “the day of your perfection,” Greek *hēmera teleiōseōs*) is fulfilled, for he will complete your *ordination* (literally, “the perfection of your hands,” Greek *teleiōsei tas cheiras hymōn*) in seven days... (Leviticus 8:31, 33) (trans. *Lexham English Septuagint*, p. 124)

That’s Leviticus 8:31-33, Greek Septuagint. So notice, in that passage, in Leviticus 8, the Greek word *teleoō*, perfect, is used to describe both the day of ordination and the act of ordination. The day of ordination is called the day of your perfection — being made complete — and then the act of ordination is called the perfection of your hands. Now, it’s not clear exactly what that means. Even in the original Hebrew, the term that would be used to describe a priest’s ordination is sometimes “the filling of his hands.” You can see how that would become “the completion of his hands.” And we don’t know exactly what that entailed. It *seems* to have been a way of expressing that the priest was given the sacrifice, the ordination sacrifice — his hands were filled probably with the bread offering, known as the *mincha* or one

of the sacrificial offerings. And then he would offer that up to God in his first act of priestly sacrificial offering.

Whatever that expression means, the point is that the word *teleoō* — to be made perfect — is *the* Greek word for the ordination of a priest in the Jewish Scripture and in the book of Leviticus and Exodus. So when Hebrews, the letter to the Hebrews — which, by the way, is all about the priesthood. I mean, you read Hebrews from chapter 1 all the way to chapter 13. The central theme of the book — and the vast majority of the book in terms of its topics throughout the chapters — is about the priesthood of Jesus Christ. So when you see the word *teleoō* in a book that's almost entirely about the priesthood, in a first century Jewish context, the natural reading would be that it's referring to the ordination of Jesus, the consecration of Jesus, His act of priestly sacrificial offering as a priest...as the true priest of the new and eternal covenant.

So when Hebrews 5 says:

...and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him...

It's talking about His perfection as a priest. It's not talking about the elimination of some sin or some flaw from Him. And it's really unfortunate in this case that the lectionary stops in verse 9, because if you have any doubts about what I'm suggesting to you, you can just read the next verse. Because in verse 10 — Hebrews 5:10, which isn't in the lectionary but is in Hebrews — it actually repeats the line and makes explicit reference to the priesthood. So I'll read the full text now, and you'll hear what I mean. So, I'll go back to verse 8:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect...

...think here, being ordained, being consecrated a priest.

...he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek.

Now this is a classic example of what happens in Hebrew poetry. It's called synonymous parallelism, where you'll take two verses of the poem and they'll say the same thing in two different ways. There are two different ways of saying the same thing. "Being perfected" and "becoming a source of salvation for all" is the same thing as "being designated a high priest...according to the order of Melchiz'edek." Does that make sense? Do you see the verbal parallelism there? So to be perfected and to be designated priest are two ways of saying the same thing, which is exactly the case in the book of Leviticus 8.

So in closing, then, what Hebrews is doing — and this is very important, on the fifth Sunday of Lent as we head toward the celebration of Palm Sunday and the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Passion and Death — is to remind us that the crucifixion of Jesus isn't just an execution. That's what it would have looked like to anyone who saw it. You have a Jewish non-citizen being sentenced to death by capital punishment, by hanging in asphyxiation. It just looks like a Roman execution. But through the eyes of faith, the letter to the Hebrews is revealing to us that what looks like an execution is actually an ordination. It's the perfection of Jesus' day where He will offer as a sacrifice not the blood of bulls or goats or lambs or even the unleavened bread of the *mincha* of the Old Testament, but He will offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of all.

So the crucifixion isn't just an execution; it's a sacrifice. It's a priestly sacrifice of a man who was not a priest according to the order of Levi, but high priest according to the order of Melchiz'edek. That's what Hebrews is revealing to us.

So in closing then, as we prepare for that remembrance of Holy Week and prepare to celebrate the Triduum, let's keep in mind the words of Hebrew 5 and the window that Hebrews 5 gives us into the prayers of Jesus in two ways. I'll just end with two quotes here from the living tradition. First is from St. John Chrysostom in his *Homilies on Hebrews* about Jesus in Gethsemane and the tears that He wept. John says this:

Do you see that he sets forth nothing else than His care and the exceeding greatness of His love? For what does the [expression] "with strong crying"

mean? *The Gospel nowhere says this, nor that He wept when He prayed, nor yet that He uttered a cry.* Do you see that it was a condescension? *For he could not [merely] say that He prayed, but also “with strong crying.”*²

So Chrysostom here just draws our attention to the fact that the Gospels don't tell us that Jesus wept in Gethsemane. We only know that from Hebrews. But it reveals to us the depths of the condescension to which Jesus came, that as the eternal Son of God, He not only assumed a human nature, became a human being, was born in human flesh, but that as His Passion began, He not only suffered for the salvation of humanity...He also wept as a full human being for the sins of the world for which He was about to be crucified.

So the second passage is from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, regards what Hebrews says there about:

Jesus offered up prayers and supplications...and he was heard for his godly fear.

I suggested earlier that ultimately the answer to His prayer by which He's saved from death is the Resurrection. And in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2606, in the section on prayer, it talks about the prayers of Jesus on the cross — in particular, His last words on the cross. And listen to what it says:

All the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history are summed up in this cry of the incarnate Word. Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son.³

So the ultimate answer to all of the prayers of Jesus — not just those in Gethsemane but all of His prayers from the cross:

... “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34a)

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews* 8.3; *NPNF1*, 14.404

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 2606

Those prayers are all answered in the Resurrection...and not just the prayers of Jesus, but of all human beings. The Resurrection is the ultimate answer to every prayer that we have. And so let us reflect on that as we prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Passion, of His death, and of His Resurrection.