

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Fifth Sunday of Lent

First reading:

(Jeremiah 31.31-34))

The New Covenant

For Christians, this reading from Jeremiah can be called the climax of the Old Testament. It is certainly the climax of the history of Israel that we have been following in the first readings of the Sundays of Lent. The exile to Babylon seemed to be the end of the road. Israel had lost king, country, Temple and cult. They had been unfaithful to their Lord once too often, and at last the covenant was left in tatters. Paradoxically, however, this was the moment of advance, the moment that brought Israel to be a world religion, by which all humanity could benefit from the salvation promised to Abraham. The covenant was to be renewed, not, as previously, dependent on the institutions, Law and cult of Israel, but open to every individual, an individual commitment to the Lord, written on human hearts. 'No need for everyone to teach brother'? Yes, we must still learn from one another and accept the guidance of the Church, but the bond is between God and the individual, no longer the race as such. This is 'the covenant in my blood for the forgiveness of sin' to which Jesus refers at the Last Supper. He sees it ratified in his blood, as the first covenant was ratified in the blood of animal sacrifice. The forgiveness it brings is the final forgiveness, pre-echoed in God's forgiveness of the sin of Israel down the ages.

Question:

What important lesson have I recently learned from someone else?

Second reading:

(Hebrews 5.7-9)

Jesus' Prayer

The wonderful second reading is the heart of the Letter to the Hebrews that dwells on the priesthood of Christ. Here the author prepares us for the coming celebration of the Passion by reflecting on the double aspect of the human fear and pain of Jesus, and his complete, loving obedience.

It says his prayer was heard. What prayer? Not the prayer to be spared death, for that prayer was not heard. Rather the deeper prayer, the prayer at the heart of his burning desire to establish the kingship of God in human hearts, bringing peace between heaven and earth by his perfect obedience. How then did he 'learn obedience through suffering'?

The secret of the Cross of Jesus is that here he reached the perfect obedience to his Father, giving everything to his Father's will. His whole life and ministry had been devoted to the Father's will, to establishing the Father's Kingship on earth. Now it reaches its highest point. His perfect obedience overrode and expunged the disobedience of Adam, that is, the archetypal disobedience of the whole human race. So by accepting defeat, pain and humiliation he obtained for himself and for all victory, bliss and exaltation to glory.

Question:

What have I learnt from suffering, my own or someone else's?

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Gospel:

(John 12.20-33)

Exaltation through Suffering

This moving gospel reading is the immediate prelude to the account of the Last Supper and the Passion. It is full of Jesus' dread and confidence at what he knows is approaching. I

n the gospel of John, there is no agony in the garden before Jesus' arrest, for in John the story of the Passion is so shaped that it is clearly the triumph of the Son of man. There is no mention of humiliation or mockery. Jesus remains in control from the beginning, when he permits the guards to take him into custody, until the end, when he calls out that he is ready to die: 'It is complete.' This is all the hour of the exaltation of the Son of man, when Jesus is raised up in every sense.

All the more important, then, for John to show before the Passion that the cost for Jesus was real, with this little dialogue in prayer between Jesus and his Father. This is John's equivalent of the prayer in the garden.

The second reading from Hebrews shows that there were in early Christianity strong but slightly variant traditions of Jesus' prayer before his Passion. All express his very human fear, his unshakable commitment to his task and his loving confidence in his Father's care.

Question:

What are my real fears? Can I entrust them to God?
