

Lent 5  
March 21, 2021

In the name of God, who in Jesus,  
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.  
AMEN

Can you believe it? Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. Well actually it used to be called Palm Sunday. It now has been renamed "Palm Sunday: The Sunday of the Passion." The definition of Passion, used in this way, means "suffering." With that in mind, we see how the imminent dying and death of Jesus and its significance, permeates all of today's readings. So, I would like to begin with a kind of overview of our scriptures for today.

The first reading speaks of a *new* covenant. In fact, because of its message, Jeremiah 31:31, is one of the most treasured messages of our Holy Scriptures.... The idea that God loves us so much that a new covenant is now within our very being; written on our hearts.

And then the psalm reinforces that, telling us that the covenant God really treasures is made within the human heart.

The second reading from the letter to the Hebrews, speaks of Jesus as the great high priest because of sacrificing *himself* on the cross, a sacrifice which makes all other sacrifices unnecessary.

And in the gospel, with the death of Jesus, there emerges the new consciousness of Jesus, a new awareness of the embodiment of God among us. And this is just the beginning of an awareness that takes root in countless people all over the world, for all time.

Well, let's look again at the significance of our Lord's death, beginning with the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah. We heard, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant." Heard through Christian ears, this statement is full of meaning, including terrible sadness because of the awful COST of making the new covenant. The maker of the covenant with *our* humanity is God, but it is our Lord Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection, who becomes the means by which this new covenant is made.

For present day seekers, much of this is hard to fathom. The concept of covenant, as it is understood in the Bible, has almost vanished from contemporary awareness. I mean: just imagine that you are standing on that ghastly hill, looking at Jesus of Nazareth die. Two other people are dying just as horribly. Living in Palestine two millennia ago, you would have seen crosses with bodies on them as often as someone living in eighteenth century England would have seen bodies hanging from gallows at crossroads. So what is special about the dying man on the center cross?

If we believe what Christian faith says about this man – that in him God is present in human form in a unique way – then something extraordinary has happened to the human nature we all share. For thirty years or so human nature has been lived in this person in perfect obedience to God. This is something none of the rest of us seem to be able to do. In us, there is a battle between *our* will and God's will. In Jesus there certainly was a human will. But... it was totally offered to doing God's will.

Jesus has taken human life, lived it in perfect obedience, then offered it back to God. In this one life, the bond between God and humanity – normally *fragile* in all *our* lives – is rock solid.

Actually, we should more accurately say that this *covenant* has been RE-made because God has tried again and again to make it before. The passage from Jeremiah refers to the making of a covenant with Israel as they came out of Egypt so many centuries ago, but then...they broke it. God continues to make a covenant relationship with us today...and... we break it. Yet God, loving and forgiving, always tries again. //// In our Eucharistic Prayer C we say “We turned against you, and betrayed your trust...Again and again you called us to return”. In the stories of remaking the covenant relationship, we have an image of God as the lover of humanity. In this passage from Jeremiah, God is referred to as the *husband* of our human nature. God is saying that the new covenant will be within the very hearts of the people. Until then, religion among the people of God had been *External* – the saying of ritual words and the doing of ritual acts. Now ... it will be different, the prophet Jeremiah says. He visualizes a future where the faith of the people will be not so much an institutionally formalized religion as a *personally experienced spirituality*: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts,” the book of Jeremiah tells us. //// I think, perhaps we are seeing exactly this sort of thing here at St. Cyprian’s. With all the challenges this year has brought, people are increasingly serious about their spiritual journey.

Let’s now take another look at today’s Psalm, because it repeatedly echoes Jeremiah’s concept of the new covenant...a covenant of the inner life...a kind of new spirituality. We hear these echoes first as the author of the psalm realizes that his own sinfulness is an internal thing. He also acknowledges that God requires not external responses, but “truth deep within me.” If inner integrity is present, then the external actions that follow will have their own integrity. Therefore, he asks God to help him “understand wisdom secretly.” Three times more we hear him speak of his relationship with God as essentially an interior one. He prays: “Create in me a clean heart, Oh God” and offers his spirit for transformation into a “right spirit.” He realizes that these things can only *be* if the Holy Spirit of God is within him in the first place. He says, “Take not your Holy Spirit from me.” //////////

Let’s consider more deeply our second reading this morning, which was from the letter to the Hebrews. When the earliest followers of Jesus, the earliest Christians, began to think about the meaning of the extraordinary encounter with Jesus – his words, his actions, his death, his resurrection – they sought many ways of giving it meaning. One way was to link it all together with things familiar from their lives as Hebrew people. Every year the high priest of Israel went alone into the Holy of Holies in the temple to offer sacrifice for the sins of the whole people of God. It was understood that, by this sacrifice, the bond with God, broken by human sin, was forged again, at least for another year. This tradition was used by the early Christians to explain what Jesus had done. He too had gone into the ultimate Holy of Holies. He had gone through death into the presence of God. There he offered to God a sacrifice, this time for all of humanity. The sacrifice he offered was nothing less than *himself*, and the bond he created between humanity and God would be forever.

The cost of that sacrifice is stated here in the letter to the Hebrews. It says, “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears.” There is no attempt to downplay the humanity of Jesus at this time of his life. Jesus behaves in an utterly human way, *but* it is by the offering of himself *totally* to God that, as the reading said, “he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” That is, if we, as Christ followers, as Christians, deliberately commit ourselves to living as Jesus did, that is to try always to follow his commandments of love, to live for the other rather than self, to live compassionately, then he

becomes our salvation. If we commit ourselves to Jesus' way of living out our human nature, we are saved from the foolishness of trying to live for ourselves alone. //////////////

In the Gospel some Greeks ask to see Jesus. Not only the Judean crowd now looks to the revelation of Jesus, who in earlier verses in this Gospel was referred to as the King of Israel, but now, the Greeks from the wider world appear, seeking Jesus. They are from the city of Bethsaida, where Jews and Gentiles have intermingled. These Greeks are from the Greek world, whether they are Greek speaking Jews from the dispersion of the Jews, or whether they are Gentiles. For Jesus is now to be lifted up on the cross that he may draw the whole world to himself. It is a powerful encounter. I have always found this part of the gospel very moving. I see it taking place under lowering skies. I see Jesus as weary. I am intrigued that the Greek visitors came to Philip. I wonder why these details are written for us. I wonder if Philip had a naturally welcoming manner about him. I wonder too, why Philip first went to Andrew. Was Philip a bit reserved or hesitant in the presence of Jesus? And now, while the world with its mix of Jews, Greeks, Gentiles, watches ...here is Jesus, in agony, making his final decision of obedience unto death, in servanthood and sonship. Such obedience is indeed the glorification of God. ////////////// And God answers: He HAS glorified his name and he will glorify it again. It is salvation from *all* that would bind human beings to lesser things.//////////////////// Who can comprehend it?

Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." To grow, the seed must die. The cost will be his own death. It is total selflessness. How much more could Jesus do or say to help us know that we cannot have true life if we think it is all about our own selves.

Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ////////////// I wonder what WE do intentionally or unintentionally..... that affects others to see Jesus. Maybe they don't know or can't say that they want to see Jesus, but.... are we seeing him ourselves? And, if we are, are we helping others to see Jesus by what *we* do and by what *we* say?

In Jeremiah 31:31 God says that - his covenant of LOVE WITH US- is written *within* our hearts. May each of us know that to be true more and more in each new day of our lives.

AMEN