

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year B

March 17, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34 (I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel.)

Responsory: Psalm 51 (Create a clean heart in me, O God.)

Second Reading: Hebrews 5:7-9 (When he was made perfect through suffering, Christ became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.)

Gospel: John 12:20-33 (The grain of wheat, which must die in order to produce much fruit.)

The Prophet Jeremiah's consoling message today seems out of character for a man whom we generally regard as a fire-and-brimstone preacher. Jeremiah spent most of his life chastising his people for their wickedness and warning of the destruction that they were bringing upon themselves by their disobedience. But, now that Jerusalem has fallen, and all of those unheeded prophecies have been fulfilled, Jeremiah has a new message of hope for his people in exile: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a *new* covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." It will not be like the first covenant, which was based on obedience to the Law. Rather, this new covenant will be based on *mercy* and an intimate knowledge of the Lord. God says, "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for *I will forgive their evil-doing and remember their sin no more.*"

It was relatively easy for God to establish a covenant based on *law*. All he needed was a messenger like Moses to deliver his commandments to the people. But, the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah would require something more. To establish such an intimate relationship between God and his people, someone needed to break through the seemingly impenetrable barrier between the eternal God and mortal humanity. Of course, human beings couldn't make that leap on their own. God had to take on our human nature, becoming incarnate. And then he had to pass through death to eternal life, so that we could do the same. By becoming one of us, Jesus was able to reveal God's will and God's nature to us in a way that we could actually grasp with our human minds. "From the least to the greatest," all could finally know the Lord. And, by suffering and dying as one of us, and then being raised up again, Jesus was able to open the way to our own immortality. He made it possible for us not just to *know* the Lord, but to enter into *communion* with our God. So, the covenant which he established by his own blood is one in which intimate knowledge of God is written upon our hearts and communion with God is our eternal destiny.

In today's gospel, Jesus uses a beautiful image to describe his saving mission – the grain of wheat which falls to the ground and dies, so that it may produce much more abundant life. While Jesus traveled about Israel with his disciples, he certainly touched many lives. He was widely hailed as a great teacher, a healer, a prophet, and a miracle worker. Yet, none of his good works could bring about a new covenant with God. Only his *death* on the cross could accomplish that. As the Letter to the Hebrews explains, when he was lifted up on the cross, "he

became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” By giving up his life for others, Jesus not only preserved his own life, but all of *our lives*, as well. Through that singular act of self-emptying, he produced infinitely more “fruit” than he could have produced in a whole lifetime of ministry.

One oddity in today’s gospel is how Jesus suddenly recognizes that his “hour” has come. The arrival of those two Gentiles who ask to see Jesus doesn’t seem to be of any great consequence, until we remember what has just transpired immediately before that and recall the prophecies that are being fulfilled by these events. Jesus has just made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the one we hear about on Palm Sunday, with a great crowd of Jewish people acclaiming him as their Messiah and King. Then, the very next thing that happens, in John’s Gospel, is these Gentiles who have come for the Passover Feast also come forward, wanting to meet Jesus. That sounds very much like the prophecies which spoke of the Messiah gathering all the scattered people of Israel, coming to the Temple amid great celebration, *and* inspiring Gentiles to come and join themselves to God’s people. All three elements of those prophecies are present. This was the sign that said to Jesus, “*Now the hour has come for me to offer up my life and be glorified by my Father. This is the time for me to be lifted up from the earth, so that I may draw everyone to myself.*”

To emphasize that Jesus’ death and resurrection are really *one singular event*, John uses an ambiguous verb, “to lift up,” which can refer either to hanging someone on a cross or raising him up to heaven. Jesus appears to be speaking primarily about *crucifixion*, not resurrection, but it really is both at the same time. The Son of Man is to be *glorified* by his voluntary *sacrifice* for the sake of others. The Father also will be glorified by his *death*, for nothing could more clearly demonstrate the Father’s love for his people than to hand over his only begotten Son. Jesus is ready to become that grain of wheat which falls to the ground and dies, so that others may receive new and abundant life through him. He has no intention of clinging to the power and authority that he wields as the Messiah. He’s going to renounce it all. And he insists that his disciples likewise detach *themselves* from all the things of this world that may prevent them from making their lives a *total gift to the Lord*. He tells them, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.” From the context, it appears that he means for us to be with him on *the cross*, not just in heaven. Jesus is exhorting all of us to put others first, even to lay down our lives for them, if necessary, just as he did. Jesus wants our lives to be fruitful, like his. And so, we also must be willing to become grains of wheat which fall to the ground and die.

God was glorified not just by Jesus’ *resurrection*, but especially by his death on the cross. Just so, God is glorified *in us* whenever we offer our own lives for the sake of others. We know this because God has written his law upon our hearts, as he promised. And this new law commands not just obedience, but *willing sacrifice* and *self-giving love*.