

## [35] Fifth Sunday of Lent

**Readings:** *Jeremiah 31:31-34 / Psalm 51 / Hebrews 5:7-9 / John 12:20-33*

Our first reading selection today is taken from what is called the *Oracles of the Restoration of Israel and Judah*. Jeremiah's writings would be an inspiration for Isaiah; indeed, they proved more beneficial after his death in that they gave hope to a vanquished people. He promoted religious reform and fought the idolatry that plagued Judah. With the apostasy and fall of the nation, he suffered arrest, imprisonment, public disgrace and exile.

The prophet speaks of an impending new covenant, different from before, in that faithfulness will replace their current infidelity. God's law will not be upon tablets of clay or rock that might be lost or broken, but rather placed within them and written "upon their hearts." The words once spoken to Abraham will be made everlasting: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." While unspoken, it sounds like the language of grace. It deeply resonates with Christ's words about his new and everlasting covenant. Just as the admonition of the Gospel was "repent and believe," i.e. "obey," the prophet writes in the persona of the Almighty, "I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more." Our Lord came into the world for the forgiveness of sins. He heals the breach between God and man. The new Israel and the New Judah is the Church.

The responsorial similarly speaks of God's law imprinted upon human hearts: "Create a clean heart in me, O God." The two-fold commandment of Christ emphasizes the love of God and of neighbor. We are to have the Lord's heart in the priorities we set for ourselves, in regard to that which we love and in how we demonstrate or witness compassion, generosity and forgiveness. Jeremiah was of the priestly class— priests offered sacrifice— they sought to make atonement for sin. The prophet lamented how hard-hearted were both the rulers and the people that followed them. They invited their doom by forfeiting divine favor and protection. No doubt our Lord had Jeremiah in mind when he spoke about how the leaders and crowd even rejected him. We read in Matthew 23:37-39: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling! Behold, your house will be abandoned, desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" God is faithful. Both God and man will be faithful in Christ.

What is a clean heart? It is pure for sure, but it is also undivided. It is a heart with a single purpose. Do we want this heart? If so then I would recommend the prayer that the apostle Paul gave the Ephesians:

"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his

glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:14-21).

The second reading presents Christ as the one High Priest of Christianity. Our Lord did “offer prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears” to the Father on our behalf. Jesus is faithful to his mission given him by the Father unto the Cross. He does what no other priest had ever accomplished, he offered perfect atonement and “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” When our Lord beseeches us to take up our crosses and follow him, he is appealing to us as his priestly people in baptism. It is within the oblation of Christ that our sacrifices and self-offering can be made to the Father. This merits for us a share in the Lord’s reward or victory. Every disciple is to believe, love and serve with a priestly heart. The measure of all love is in terms of surrender or sacrifice. We belong to the Lord. He is a jealous God. He will not share us. He abides in us by grace so that we might live in him forever.

There are several times (both explicitly and in veiled symbolic language) that Jesus prophesies about his coming betrayal, passion and death. He asserts in today’s Gospel, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” After making a reference to his coming death, his attention turns to his followers. “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.” How would you advertise for such an ordeal? Imagine you were reading the HELP WANTED ads and your eyes ran across the following: “Wanted... men willing to give up family, position, wealth and power... yes, absolutely everything so as to follow a prophet who claims to be God. Note that you must be willing to follow him in being betrayed, mocked, tortured and murdered. He promises to give you eternal life.” Sounds crazy, does it not? Who would answer such a thing? And yet, that is precisely the call of the Gospel.

- What it means to have a sacrificial “priestly” heart?
- What must we do to show that we belong to the Lord and his kingdom?
- How might we be prophetic instruments in bringing reform to our society?
- Have you ever prayed for someone or something to the point of tears?