

**Fifth
Sunday
of Lent**

Year B



FIRST READING
Jeremiah 31:31–34

PSALM
Psalm 51:3–4, 12–15

SECOND READING
Hebrews 5:7–9

GOSPEL
John 12:20–33

*Scripture quotations from
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PRAYER

Psalm 51:3–4, 12–15

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new
and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away
from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit
from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors
your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

READING THE WORD

First Reading
Jeremiah 31:31–34

The days are surely 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 covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant

that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Second Reading
Hebrews 5:7–9

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

Gospel
John 12:20–33

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some

Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

HEARING THE WORD

“The Covenant of Life”

The fifth Sunday of Lent focuses on the theme of the new covenant. The notion of the covenant stands at the very heart of the biblical revelation describing the relationship between God and his people. The first covenant described in the OT was reflected in the Israelite Law. Unfortunately, it was frequently broken as the people were unable to be consistently obedient and faithful. Consequently, the new covenant was made to ensure that the covenantal relationship would continue and find its full expression in the eternal life offered to all.

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah announces God’s decision to establish a new covenant, after the Sinai covenant was broken by the faithless nation. Jeremiah makes a comparison between these two. The Sinai covenant was a conditional one which means that if people obeyed God, he would bless them. The people had obligations towards God, who, in turn, pledged himself to be Israel’s protector and helper. Such a covenant could be broken and terminated when violations occurred. Indeed, Israel broke the covenant with God and this led to the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah, who saw this tragedy personally, anticipates that

God will make a new covenant, one that will be unbreakable and qualitatively different from the first one in three major ways.

The first covenant failed not because of God’s infidelity, but due to the sinfulness of the entire nation. The faithful and innocent Israelites bore the pain caused by the failures of their fellow members of the community. The new covenant would be personal, with every individual responsible for his or her actions and their consequences (Jer 31:29-30).

Second, the first covenant was written on tablets of stone (Ex 24:12). The new covenant will be written on the hearts of people. In the biblical language, the heart was the center of knowing and willing. To inscribe the divine Law on the heart means to place it indelibly in someone’s mind. Thus, the new covenant would not be merely a set of external laws, but a part of the person’s heart and mind. Those in the new covenant would not require any intermediary or teacher but would know God intimately (Jer 31:34).

Finally, Jeremiah looks at the spiritual dimension to the new covenant alluding to the forgiveness of sins. God is going to respond to the people’s sin with forgiveness and mercy. This would ensure that the new covenant will never be permanently severed. Jeremiah anticipates that God will change the way in which

the covenant operates, making it a relationship based on personal responsibility, the intimate knowledge of God and sustained through the act of divine mercy.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, adopts Jeremiah’s view of the new covenant quoting him extensively in Heb 8:8-12. The passage read today comes from the part of the letter focused on Jesus as the High Priest of the new covenant. This is a different type of priesthood, one in the “order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:10). Jesus is different from the Israelite priests who served under the first covenant. As the High Priest, he offered one unique sacrifice leading to the permanent forgiveness of the peoples’ sin. Sins might still be committed by individuals and subsequently forgiven through repentance. However, Jesus’ one-time sacrifice on the cross ensures that the relationship between God and his people will never be decisively disrupted by human sinfulness (Heb 10:1-18).

As the High Priest Jesus offered one supreme sacrifice of himself. This sacrifice was his own death. He endured it as the true sacrificial victim – with cries and tears – offering himself to God. Because he himself was God, his self-sacrifice resulted in everlasting reconciliation. Fulfilling Jeremiah’s prophecy, the new relationship established by Jesus between God and

the people would be unbreakable.

Interpreting Jesus' death as the sacrifice for sins, the author reveals a very different understanding of priesthood to that practiced under the first covenant. In the sacrificial rituals of the OT, priests sacrificed animals or agricultural products, not themselves. But Jesus is simultaneously the high priest and the sacrificial victim. His self-sacrifice shows radical identification and complete devotion to God and to the people. This is the type of covenant Jeremiah anticipated when speaking about the law written in the person's heart. Jesus showed what that means by becoming the priest and the sacrifice at once. Doing so, he brought about reconciliation and the unbreakable union between God and humanity.

The Gospel of John calls Jesus' last days of suffering, death and resurrection a "glorification". Jesus' glorification takes place on the cross where he seals the new covenant. Jesus explains his own mission through the symbol of the grain that must fall on the ground and die in order to bring about a new life. The imagery of the dying of the seed and bearing much fruit is contrasted with preserving itself and remaining alone. The seed becomes productive only if it first dies in the ground. The author applies this image allegorically to Jesus, pointing to the necessity of his death in order to bear much fruit. The fruit of his

death is drawing all people to himself lifted on the cross. Jesus becomes like a magnet raised above the earth drawing all to itself. This is a metaphor for bringing people into the heavenly realm and into the new union with God. This union is the new covenant made through Jesus' death leading the believers to full union with God in eternal life.

The Christians are the people of the new covenant. Jeremiah described this covenant as a very intimate relationship with God, rooted in God's mercy and not limited to the fulfilment of external practices of the Law. The second reading shows that Jesus established this covenant and made it permanent by his one-time sacrifice. He also demonstrated that this new union implies utter dedication to God and the people to the point of complete self-sacrifice. The Gospel reading reveals that the new covenant made by Jesus on the cross leads to the eternal life offered to the faithful. The believers are invited to enter into this covenant through faith in Jesus and the life of wholehearted dedication to God and others, even to the point of becoming a sacrifice, a grain germinating in the soil. Such a response demonstrates the desire for being permanently in God's presence felt by the psalmist when he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me".

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The theme of the fifth Sunday of Lent helps us to re-discover the covenant of life that God has made with each one of us. Today we are led to see how God has established this new covenant with us, and what it means for us.

First, to understand today's theme of the covenant of life let us look back to the previous Sundays of this Lenten period. All of them alluded to the covenant that God has made with us, his people, in one way or another. During the first Sunday of Lent we heard about the covenant God made with Noah. Then we read about the covenant between God and Abraham. In the third Sunday's readings we heard about the Sinai covenant reflected in the ten commandments. Last Sunday we heard about the covenantal temple, the place where people worshiped their God. Today we read about the new covenant, a covenant not based on law but on love. Through the prophet Jeremiah God tells us about a new law carved not on stone but in our hearts. God has already planted his law within us intending to draw us into an intimate relationship with him, so that there will be no gaps between God and his chosen people. We can reflect and appreciate the wonderful gift God has given us in this new covenant made by Jesus. He has chosen to be our God and calls us his people. This covenant

has been made by the suffering and resurrection of Christ and nothing can destroy it.

We are reminded today that the new covenant was made by the suffering and resurrection of Christ. Raised on the cross, Jesus gave his life for us and conquered sin. God, raising Jesus from the dead showed his unmatched love for him and for us. He opened the way for all of us who believe in him to enter heaven. So many of us today suffer because of illness, accidents, disease, pain, hopelessness or loneliness. However, contemplating the cross we realize that it does not symbolize death but a new covenant whose members are bound to God by a bond which cannot be broken. Jesus' death created an unbreakable cord anchored in our hearts which will pull us through the darkness of death to the light of resurrection. The good news of this covenant carries wonderful words of strength and consolation for us, who, through faith in Jesus, entered into this new covenant.

As people of the new covenant we are invited to seek an ever closer relationship with God. So often we are left feeling distant from him. We don't feel his presence or sense that we are drifting away from the very source of our life. Often this occurs because we feel inadequate and sinful. Sin always remains an obstacle to a deeper personal relationship and union with God. Repeated

falling into sin may discourage us to the point of giving up. Yet, we need to always keep the image of the cross before our eyes and know that God's commitment to us never ends. The cross stands as an unmistakable reminder that God bound himself to us and not even our sins can stand in the way of his love. Thus, we are once again reminded today of his new covenant of life with us, one that is based on love manifested in the suffering, death and resurrection of his Son. The cross invites us to cultivate daily a personal union with him to experience this love and keep on rising above the obstacles of sin and doubt.

PROVERB

*“By trying often,
the monkey
learns to stand.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

Do I maintain intimate relationship with God in my daily life? How exactly do I do that?

In what ways am I helping others to seek and deepen their union with God, even when they are faced with

suffering in this world?

Response to God:

During the remaining days of Lent, I will make a conscious effort to deepen my union with God and his Son by repenting and receiving the sacrament of confession to remove the obstacles that separate me from experiencing God's love fully.

Response to your World:

During this week, I will set a day for personal recollection during which I will receive the sacrament of penance.

As a group we will collect foodstuff donations, sacrifice our time and spend some time in a children's or elderly home, with the focus of showing God's love flowing for them through us.

PRAYER

Lord,
grant me the grace
to know you
more intimately,
to love you
more deeply,
and to serve you
more fervently.
Amen