

the Sunday Readings



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. (Jn. 12:23-4)

5th SUNDAY IN LENT

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*now is the hour*¹

introduction

'*The hour*' is a biblical term which is repeatedly mentioned in John's gospel. The gospel is a long and profound meditation on '*the hour*', written as a drama in which everything is oriented to the final outcome; the encounter of *the power of Jesus based on love with the unjust power rejecting him*. The drama ends on the cross and finally, in the victory over the cross and death; the resurrection!

Today, we pray, to end our belief in and reliance, on a culture of death. Ignorance and self-indulgent greed; the characteristics of a culture of death; weigh down our society. We believe through baptism has changed this dire and obvious condition of human life. We see the odds against us realistically. We see Jesus offering a way of facing those odds. We see him taking on the culture of death and transforming death's meaning.

first reading: Jeremiah 31 : 31 – 34²

[a new covenant]

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.(31) 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.(32) 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.(33) 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.(34)

The Israelite Scriptures do not reflect much upon any '*perfect*' or '*finished*' community. But Jeremiah, who could speak so poignantly about the judgement and end of old Israel,³ anticipates a people fully turned to the Lord in a glad, joyous communion (v.32b). Jeremiah speaks about God's new age. This is not talk about any institutional community structure, bureaucracy, hierarchy or ideology. The reference is to a community as a slice of humanity that is committed to and participates in God's resolve for a new world.

The newness does not depend upon old Israel – but it includes it (vv.31-32). And the new covenant community will be characterised by a full inner obedience to the Torah (v.33) and a new attitude of utter forgiveness towards each other

1 Front Cover: Christ bidding farewell to his Disciples by Duccio di Buoninsegan. (1260 – 1318).

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 *Jr.4:19-26 & 7:27-34*

within the community, made possible by God's first having mercy on them (v.34). The text affirms and anticipates that God has in mind and in heart a new economy of heaven and Earth. The new heaven and Earth will be quite unlike the present. It is a future economy that is neither mortgaged to the present, nor derived from the present. That's an intellectual scandal for modernists who believe that there will be no new pieces of reality given and that all that remains is to manage well what is and what will be. And all that's left to do is to secure as much of reality for oneself as one can.

Jeremiah anticipates a Torah-shaped community which replaces the old social reality but this speech isn't the final word. It is God's freedom that's at work in Israelite society. A new people is promised and a new political reality is given – the old disobedient past mentioned in last Sunday's first reading is over-ridden.⁴ God has moved on. The Israelites in their imagination are now authorised to move on as well; waiting, listening, hoping and anticipating, the newness that will bring all creation under God's rule; the land, animals and this people (v.32). All will form a chorus of praise to God.

response: Psalm 51 : 1 – 2, 10 – 12, 15⁵

[a prayer for cleansing and pardon]

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.(1)
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.(2) . . .
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.(10)
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.(11)
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.(12) . . .
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.(15)*

The speakers demand from *the holy One* what they cannot do for themselves; restore their personhood – with '*a clean heart*' (v.10a). It means the ability to make a new beginning and having the capacity for new living. The plea for '*a new spirit*' (v.10b) also asks for the chance to begin again. '*The wind*' to govern is gladly given by God.⁶ But its never possessed as of right; it is always held in trust. The speakers place themselves at the complete disposal of God and ask for a re-issue of gifts that make '*the good life*' possible.

4 Cf. 2 Ch.36:14-23

5 Ps. 51 – a lament and one of the seven Penitential Psalms, prays for the removal of the personal and social disorders that sin has brought.

6 Is.11:2

The act of deep repentance assumes a stance in which the gift of power for governing, might be given again. The original psalmist might have had in mind the experience of David. David lost God's authorising *power-to-rule* when he acted unthinkably against Uriah and Bathsheba. Yet a deeply disoriented life can begin again. David was guilty of pride against God. He imagined he was autonomous; that he could live his life without reference to the Lord God and God's commandments. Where there is serious disorder in our lives, responsibility must be taken for it. But there is the possibility of new life too! This new reality cannot be forced from God's side. We can only receive it as a free gift.

second reading: Hebrews 5:7-9⁷

[Jesus, the compassionate high priest]

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.(7) Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;(8) and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.(9)

Earlier in the passage the writer describes the characteristics of the Aaronic high priest (vv.1-4). The cultic priest offered sacrifices for sins; empathised with the weaknesses of the people; and exhibited humility in light of being appointed by God. Then the writer applies the same characteristics of cultic priesthood to Christ; he becomes, "*the source of eternal salvation*" (v.9). The priesthood of Christ, the writer argues, is realised in the once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus offered for sin. The cultic practices of the Aaronic priesthood are merely shadows of this offering.

That the old cultic practices are no longer valid for Christ, is designated by God (vv.5-6,10). The writer links the title, 'Son', with high-priest.⁸ Combining the Israelite apocalyptic 'Son of man' images with the language of Platonic mysticism, the writer interprets Jesus as the high priest established by God. 'Son' is a title that entails ideas of obedience and intimacy. There are about Christ's priesthood these qualities that clearly make it superior to the line of the mysterious Melchizedek. By '*obedience to the WORD*' (*the Torah of the Lord God*), Jesus identifies with human weakness (v.8). The divine high-priest isn't immune to suffering but learns from it. Suffering is his tutor. Suffering is a necessary ingredient of faithfulness to God. The reader is encouraged. Jesus our high priest is our companion, who empathises with our pain and prevents our sufferings from leading to despair.

7 [Hb.5:7-9] Only the author of Hebrews quotes Ps.110:4, here and in Hb.7:17, 21, to show that Jesus has been called by God to his role as priest. Hb.5:7-8 deal with his ability to sympathize with sinners, because of his own experience of the trials and weakness of human nature, especially fear of death. In his present state, weakness is foreign to him, but he understands what we suffer because of his previous earthly experience.

8 Pss. 2:7 & 110:4

Christ has been '*perfected*' through suffering (v.9a). By facing mortality and learning obedience in what he suffered, Christ is validated by God and becomes what the Aaronic priesthood could never be – the source of ultimate life for all (v.9b). In the final chapter of *the Letter*, the writer exhorts readers to take on the priestly mantle themselves. They are invited, "*to suffer outside the city gate*" as Jesus did and continually, "*offer unending sacrifices of praise to God*".⁹

gospel reading: John 12 : 20 – 33

[some Greeks wish to see Jesus and he speaks about his death]

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks(20) They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."(21) Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.(22) Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.(23) 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.(24) Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.(25) Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.(26) "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.(27) Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."(28) The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."(29) Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.(30)

Facing his own imminent death, Jesus thinks in terms of God's covenant plan for the salvation of all humanity (v.24), when replying to the request of some Greek-speaking Israelite worshippers who were in Jerusalem for the Passover (vv.20-22).¹⁰ One view of death is to understand it as a putting an end to further achievement – when the dead a person can't do anything more. Or, another view of death is that can be an achievement in itself. For example, a heroic death can redeem a worthless life. Or, a person's death can focus the achievement of a lifetime. Paul says the death of Jesus was, '*for others*'.¹¹ That underlines the self-giving of Jesus was dominant in his life.

In the Israelite Scriptures, God's '*glory*' (v.28) is any triumph of God over oppression. When the Israelites crossed the Reed Sea freeing themselves from Egypt, the scriptures say they saw '*God's glory*' in the demise of the Egyptians.¹² That '*glory of God*' is the Lord God's appearance in history. The God of the Israelite

9 *Hb.13:12-15*

10 [v.20] *Greeks*: These are probably Gentile proselytes to Judaism (cf. *Jn.7:35*).

[vv.21-22] *Philip . . . Andrew*: The approach is made through disciples who have Greek names, suggesting that access to Jesus was mediated to the Greek world through his disciples. Philip and Andrew were from Bethsaida (*Jn.1:44*); Galileans were mostly bilingual.

11 *Rm.4:25*

12 Cf. *Ex.14:31 & 15:21*

Scriptures is essentially liberating. Now the gospel writer says that this liberation comes through *'Jesus' hour'* – the *'hour'* of his arrest, beating, ridicule, crucifixion, death and burial (v.23).

Jesus was *'glorified'* in his suffering and death. Living and loving are similar actions. To live truly, is to give our life to others. To try to save our life selfishly – isn't living.¹³ It's death *'without glory'*, as the gospel writer would say. Jesus *'worked'* for the Father's *'glory'* (v.26b). His death is freely offered and is the completion of that work according to the writer (vv.27-28) in that his *'glorification'* reveals the greatness of the Father's love for people. Jesus is the vehicle of God's judgement (vv.29-33). Whenever the prophets announced a liberation of the people (and the punishment of the oppressors) they described God as *"coming among the clouds"* to make a judgement.¹⁴ Jesus is saying that he is the Messiah and that he is establishing justice on Earth. The allusion is to *the Book of Daniel* where a mysterious person, *"like a human one"*, is described.¹⁵ This mysterious one comes, *"among the clouds of heaven"* to rule over all the Earth.

for sharing:¹⁶

- *A new covenant. Comment on [Jeremiah 31 : 31 – 34](#)*
- *Jesus, the compassionate high priest. [Comment on Hebrews 5 : 7 – 9](#)*
- *Some Greeks wish to see Jesus and he speaks about his death. [Comment on John 12 : 20 – 33](#)*

prayer:¹⁷

*In our hearts, O God,
you have written a covenant of grace,*

13 [v.25] *Their life*: The Greek word *'psyche'* refers to a person's natural life. It doesn't mean *'soul'*. Israelite anthropology did not postulate body/soul dualism in the way that is familiar to us.

14 *Jl.2:2 & Zp.1:15*

15 *Dn.7:24*

16 *Lectio Divina*: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.

17 The prayer that concludes the *Lectio Divina* is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*sealed by the obedience of Jesus your Son.
Raise us up with Christ,
the grain fallen to earth
that yields a harvest of everlasting life.
Bring us to glorify your name
by following faithfully where he has led.
We ask this through Christ,
our deliverance and hope,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:¹⁸

“John’s image of the wheat: ‘Unless the wheat-grain dies it alone remains, but if it dies it produces a great harvest.’ I suggest that where Catholics are most likely to misinterpret this gospel passage is that we think of dying in terms of destructiveness. Whereas the holy God thinks of dying in terms of being consumed with love. Fear of seeing the destruction of things which are good, or even valuable, makes us unable to choose a less sure path. Like the servant in the parable who buried his talent, we are not prepared for the risk of being a Christian.”

– Eugene O’Sullivan O.P. (1982) Celebrating Reconciliation

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18 **The review:** – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, that provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.