

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Collect: Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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 to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Hebrews 5.5–10: So also, Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; ⁶as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’ ⁷In 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; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Gospel: John 12.20–33: Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. ²⁷‘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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ ³⁰Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Reflection:

How do we respond to Jesus’ dying on the cross? I think our starting point needs to come from understanding why he was killed and what his death meant.

As we come to the end of Lent and then enter Holy Week, we hear again the Gospel narratives that help us to go deeper in our understanding of why Jesus was killed. Throughout John’s Gospel we find Jesus regularly challenging the religious leadership, especially the Pharisees, and this brings him into conflict with them.

By the time he came up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, they were looking for a way to have him arrested and put on trial. In particular in John's Gospel they accuse him of blasphemy because of what he told them of God's living and active love as present in human hearts and because of the ways he himself went about living out this love by including all people within God's love, wherever he went and however he could. He had no hidden motive or agenda, only love for the people. Love which he attributed as coming from God and which within a person's heart has God's love as its source. No wonder people from all walks of life and backgrounds sought him out, such as the Greeks who approached Philip, and whose desire to see Jesus prompts the full response from him: part of today's Gospel reading.

Jesus speaks openly to them about his death as being the way in which God's glory will be revealed, which was probably not what they were expecting and in a short parable he gives them an analogy of this. The single grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, his dying on the cross, and then from the ground its bearing of fruit that will last, the hope of new life shared in human relationships that live out God's love for all.

Jesus had already spoken about laying down his life for others and this parable confirms that he understood there were religious leaders who had heard what he said and saw what he did, who were becoming more threatened by him, more jealous of the way people responded to him and more determined to have him killed.

Their way of thinking reflected a very black and white approach to life and for them Jesus himself was the enemy, the one dishonouring their faith. Many religions at that time made much of evil spirits and demons but Jesus looked beyond this cultic imagery to challenge the religious leaders about how they needed first to love the people and attend to their daily needs rather than to simply label people as wicked and outsiders.

The day of atonement ritual of killing a scapegoat may have helped the religious leaders to justify having Jesus killed. The words of Caiaphas the High Priest "Better one man should die for you than the whole nation perish." Jesus understood what they were doing and instead of presenting himself as the cultic sacrifice they wanted, came before his accusers knowingly as a willing participant. In going to his death Jesus continuing to teach, to reconcile and to love. In this way ending the tradition of cultic sacrifice of a victim symbolically representing others, by instead being the one who dies himself as the servant of the people, ending the need for the violence and blame enacted by sacred ritual.

Both the writer of John's Gospel and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews present their understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death through what they and their first audiences knew of Temple worship. That Jesus' suffering was something inflicted on him by the powerful of his day because they could not connect with his way of generous love and his openness to all which challenged their exclusivism and narrow control. Murdering a man who always tried to do the right thing, who in doing this laid down his life understanding that through this God's love would come through.

And as we approach Holy Week this year, so to emphasise that the sacrifice of Jesus once for all on the Cross, the place where the eternal covenant is renewed, is the way in which he had himself come to understand that God's love would come through. And later on so also his followers came to understand this, taking up their Cross and journeying in his way throughout their lives in love and service to all.