

Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year B): A fresh start – Death gives way to Life.

1st Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34: A new covenant, but in our hearts;

2nd Reading: Hebrews 5:7-9: Even Jesus had to learn to obey, by suffering;

Gospel: John 12:20-23: Jesus’ “glory” – his future death, then new life.

We are now approaching the essential part of the Church year: Holy Week & Easter, with Palm Sunday next weekend. In the 1st reading, Jeremiah mentions a new relationship between God and us – something stronger than the Old Testament system. This new one will be “*deep within us*” – it will affect our most serious beliefs and emotions. As part of this deeper relationship with human beings, God “*will forgive our iniquity and never call our sin to mind*”. This means a much more personal sort of faith -and hope - than we had before.

The 2nd reading, from Hebrews, mentions how this was to happen: Christ, although God’s Son, “*learnt to obey through suffering...and became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation*”. For the writer, this explains the meaning of Jesus’ death, with the promise of the life that will follow.

In the gospel Jesus, now in the last week of his life, was in Jerusalem for the ‘festival’ – ie. Passover. Some Greeks, who were there for the same reason, went to Philip and said: “*We should like to see Jesus.*” When told this, Jesus replied with one of his most famous expressions. He said that his “hour” had now come; this was to be the moment of “glory”. By “hour” he meant the crisis-point of his life - the reason he had come into this world. It was the moment of truth, when God’s age-old plan for salvation was to be achieved through him. (He had used the same word 2 years earlier, to Mary at the wedding-feast of Cana; his ‘hour’ had not come then, but it was here, now.)

Wait: how could this ‘hour’ or crisis, which would result in his death, possibly be called “glory”? The answer is that St John sees Jesus’ death not as an awful fluke, but as the working-out of God’s plan. This plan would involve Jesus being betrayed by his own people and handed over to the Romans, who were persuaded by the Jewish leaders to execute him. For St John, this was an act of love by God, to show us how much he loved us. In other words, his incarnate Son would undergo a terrible death to show us that God is with us when we suffer and die. As I wrote last week, evil is endured by many people, but in Jesus’ case, it was accepted – an offering of love, giving us hope that God is with us, no matter how bad our experiences are.

But that is not all. Jesus compares death to the process of a wheat-grain falling on the ground and “dying” – ie, disintegrating and rotting into the ground. However, that process is necessary for the growth of the wheat-harvest some months later. For Jesus, the process of dying is the prelude to a new sort of life, which could never be imagined from the state of the previous life – just as a wheat-field in August cannot be imagined from seeds being sown in a cool, wet field months earlier. We should remember this when we get worries & doubts about the idea of life after death. The future will be unlike the present.

Jesus also says strongly that we must make choices. (If you have a Bible, or a post-1970 missal, I do recommend that you read this gospel.) If we try to cling on selfishly to this life, we shall lose the eternal life, since the one who serves Jesus must follow him: where he is, his servants must be there too. There are some Christians, mainly in fundamentalist Protestant churches, who say that we have little choice in this matter – all has been mapped-out for us in advance. I find that quite depressing, and rather chilling. Jesus’ words would then imply that God has created a huge number of people pre-destined for damnation. I would rather see his words as an invitation: yes, we need his help; yes, we make bad choices; but at least all of us have some chance. That chance, and Jesus’ example of love on Calvary, are part of what ‘glory’ means.

Finally, many, like the Greeks in the gospel, would “*like to see Jesus*”. In other words, what sort of image do we have of him, so that he is accessible to us, 2000 year later? Some people read their own situation into Jesus’ lifestyle, and “find” him there. For instance, skilled workers may identify with Jesus the carpenter; teachers, with Jesus the rabbi; doctors & nurses, with Jesus the healer; senior managers, with Jesus the Messiah; revolutionaries, with Jesus the challenger; 3rd World people, with Jesus the liberator – and so on. This is understandable, and fine – up to a point. However, I believe that ultimately, we cannot “find” or understand Jesus without the supernatural element. Without our belief that he was God’s Son, he was simply another nice, clever guy who suffered. For St John, the whole point of Jesus is that his “hour” was a crisis where good clashed with evil; the “glory” was a sacrifice – the offering of his life in love on the cross. But it was followed by resurrection – the triumph of good over evil. Without that, there is little hope for us; but with it, we can share Jesus’ risen life now (in our sacraments and prayers), and afterwards, enjoy a very different life: an eternity with God and those we have known and loved.

Fr Jim Dunne.

