

Readings for Passion Sunday

17th March 2024

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 5:5-10

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”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

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, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Gospel: St 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 honour.

“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.

A Reflection for Passion Sunday

I often wonder about the Greeks in today's Gospel passage, an account we also hear each year on the Tuesday in Holy Week. Who were they? Were they converts to Judaism who had come to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, or were they foreigners who just happened to be there? Why did they want to see Jesus? What had they heard about him and what were they expecting? Was it idle curiosity, were they hoping to see something miraculous, or did they hope that this might be someone to change the world? And what did they make of Jesus reply that speaks of those who love life losing it, or those who hate life keeping it forever, and of judgment of the world? We aren't told any of these things.

And then there's that image of seeds. Like many of you, I love gardening. For gardeners, this time of year, spring time, is especially exciting as we see the bulbs flowering, the buds bursting on the trees and new growth all around us. We plan ahead, thinking of all the things we might grow this year, the flowers, fruit and vegetables, both old favourites and new possibilities. We are full of anticipation for what the year will bring.

It is this metaphor, of the cycle of growth and fruitfulness, followed by death and decay and then new growth, that Jesus uses in his response to the Greeks. Jesus could have said so many things about himself, and indeed he did in many other places. John's Gospel contains the well-known 'I am ... sayings: 'I am ... the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way and the truth and the life; the true vine. But here, he chooses this simple metaphor from creation to explain his mission and to teach about resurrection. Just as the death of plant is not the end, that after a period of dormancy underground, there will be spring again and new growth, so for those who have faith in God, there will be new life bearing fruit for eternity. It is an image of promise.

But there is another image that also permeates our readings today, though less obviously. This passage comes at the heart of John's Gospel, at a turning point. Previously, Jesus has said three times 'My hour has not yet come ...' and twice the author has commented that 'no-one laid hands on him because his hour had not yet come'. But now Jesus says 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified'. From this point on, the Gospel narrative looks towards Jesus' death and resurrection.

And this passage, at the heart of the Gospel, also explains the heart of the Gospel message. As one commentator put it: 'The heart of the Christian Gospel is that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of what God is like, and that it has opened the way to God for all of humankind.' Paradoxically, Jesus understands, and wants his followers to understand, that he will be glorified and God will be glorified, but only through his death, to bear the fruit of resurrection.

'Heart' is a word that, in the English language, we use in many different ways, quite apart from the physical organ that keeps us alive. I have just mentioned the heart of the Gospel in the sense of its centre (more or less), and the heart of the Gospel message as in its core or main point.

Now, in our Gospel passage, having recognised that he will be glorified through his death, Jesus says 'Now my soul is troubled...', or in some translations 'Now my heart is troubled...'. Here, the heart represents the essence of his being. We sometimes speak of our heart failing us when we fear what is ahead, when we lack the will to carry on. Jesus' human nature would shrink from what lay ahead of him. Yet here, in John's account, he doesn't ask to be delivered

from it as he does in the other Gospels when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. His heart doesn't fail him. He acknowledges that this why he has come, and he is affirmed by the voice from heaven.

And a heart is also a symbol of love. God's sending of his Son is an act that expresses his heart of love for humanity and all of creation. As it says in that very well-known verse from earlier in John's Gospel: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' God gave part of God's very self, the beloved Son, so that, at the cost of Jesus' life on the Cross, a new relationship could be established between God and God's people.

As Christians, we understand this new relationship as the new covenant referred to in the passage from Jeremiah. We see this prophecy fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Jeremiah, God's people had repeatedly failed to keep the previous covenants that God had made with them, but God still loves them and us, and yearns for reconciliation. So he promises a new covenant relationship that is different from those that preceded it. This time, God will write his law on people's hearts – there's that word 'heart' again. God's law, God's desires for the way we should live our lives, the very presence of God, will be fundamental to our lives. Not something external imposed on us, but at the very centre of who we are and what we will.

This covenant is enabled by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and not through fallible human effort. It comes from God's heart of love and, as the seed represents promise, so it offers new life, both now and in eternity. For Jesus promises: 'Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also. Whoever serves me the Father will honour.'

Passion Sunday is the day when, traditionally, we deepen our Lenten observance and turn our attention fully towards the events of that first Holy Week and Jesus' journey to the Cross before the joy of Easter. I sometimes wonder if the Greeks were still around at the end of the week when Jesus was crucified, and then on that first Easter Day when he rose again. We don't know; they fade out of the story as quickly as they came. But for the first recipients of the Gospel, their presence was a sign that God's saving act was for all people. The winter of death is not the ultimate reality, spring will come. At the end of today's Gospel passage, Jesus said: 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'