

5th Sunday of Lent, Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34

This reading is from the section of Jeremiah's prophecies known as the "Book of Consolation." The preceding section tells about the exile and struggles of Israel, and is followed by a consoling description of God's plan to restore and renew Israel. The problems and punishments that Jeremiah announces to Israel are the consequences of violations of the covenant by Israel. But the bad news is followed by good news — by consolation. A day will come when God will make a New Covenant.¹

31The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This is the only passage in the Old Testament that speaks of a new covenant.² Note that the idea of a New Covenant is not the invention of later Christian reflection on the mission of Christ. The Jews not only looked forward to a Messiah, but to a new and better covenant with God.¹

32It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; The law of God will not be changed nor will God's faithfulness. The newness comes on the human side of the covenant for the law will be within us, written on our hearts. Remember that in Hebrew thought, the heart is the place of both the mind and the will.² **for they broke my covenant, and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord.**

33But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. In the New Covenant God writes the law in the HEART of man by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and His grace, (NOT ON EXTERIOR TABLETS OF STONE). Man is now able to follow the law NOT BECAUSE THE MORAL LAW HAS CHANGED, BUT BECAUSE MAN IS FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED BY THIS GRACE for the true practice of religion requires INTERIOR values such as obedience, love, and knowledge of God.¹ Here is the mark of true "circumcision." It is not a new structure, but a new spirit where each responds freely to God's will.⁵ The new covenant is a development from the old covenant. Growth from a law inscribed on tablets of stone to a law engraved on hearts of flesh is common in many aspects of life as rules become habits, good deeds become virtues, etiquette becomes loving respect. As the process of making a relationship with God slowly comes about, we move from exterior observance of religion to genuine conversion. This prophecy of Jeremiah which was spoken to Israel in exile, can serve as a model for our experience of Lent and Easter as we strive to move from mere external observance of our religion toward a more interior experience of our faith, to move from "learning about" the Lord toward "knowing" the Lord.⁴

34No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more. To "know" in the Biblical sense means deep intimacy, usually of a marital nature. God is hereby promising deep intimacy and union with each of his people through this New Covenant.¹ This became clear to Jeremiah through his own personal religious experience for he writes of the need for purification and "circumcision of the heart." If you are longing for this deep, personal relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and you have invited Him into your heart, and repented of your sins, you may find that contemplative prayer (some call it "silent prayer") is the next step for you. This New Covenant goes beyond Israel and Judah and encompasses the whole world. It extends to ALL the people.³

Hebrews 5:7-9

The author had identified Jesus as high priest and in this chapter he explains why. The qualifications are stated in verses 1-4 and he shows how Christ meets these qualifications in verses 5-10. In our selection he demonstrates the solidarity of Christ with human beings in weakness.¹⁰

7In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh, he offered 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 reverence. During the time of Christ's mortal life, his 33 years on earth, he offered prayers and supplications at various times, but especially during the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.² St. Luke describes it: "In his anguish he prayed with all the greater intensity, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground." St. Matthew tells how he began to experience sorrow and distress. Then he said to them, "My heart is nearly broken with sorrow." These prayers to the Father WERE heard even though Jesus experienced death because he was delivered through his resurrection.⁷ According to rabbinical teaching, there were three degrees of prayer, each stronger than the last—supplications, cries and tears.⁶ Jesus was heard because of his "reverence" which means his generous self-surrender to the will of the Father.⁴ The following is based on a prayer of St. Ignatius written in poetic form by Fr. Gerald Scherer:

*Take, O Lord, into your hands
The gifts that you have given me.
All that I am and have is yours—
My life, my love, my liberty.
Form me according to your will
(That may not be an easy task!)
So here's my will—and in return
Your grace and love is all I ask.*

8Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; Obedience was the only thing Scripture affirms Christ had to learn and he learned it through suffering.⁹ Christ knew what obedience was from all eternity, but he learned obedience in practice through the severities he underwent particularly in his passion and death.⁶ Jesus suffered and died that we might become a part of the family of God, spiritually healed and sharing in his nature. But he did not eliminate suffering. He changed the meaning of it. Now, because we are part of the body of Christ through Baptism, our suffering, when joined to his, is worth something! St. Paul understood this when he wrote in Colossians 1:24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church." The only thing that was lacking was our part, which is miniscule, but when joined to Christ, our suffering actually becomes redemptive! We are allowed to participate with Christ in redeeming the world and it is in the midst of our suffering that we experience most deeply the love of God. As Pope John Paul II has said in *Salvifici Doloris*, our sufferings are "a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world's Redemption."¹⁴ In addition, other people are tremendously influenced by the courage, patience, long-suffering, and joy of a suffering, obedient person.³ In a book of letters to a fellow priest encouraging Perpetual Adoration, Msgr. Pepe wrote: "This is why God allows suffering in our life. Like medicine it cures us from the illness of pride. Only when our heart has been broken, or crushed, or defeated, or humiliated, or is suffering in any way, can we experience the full sweetness of his love. For he is *the most broken one of all.*"⁸ Christ allows us to participate in his cross because

that is his means of allowing us to share in the very inner life of God. Mother Teresa understood this when she wrote: Our Lord must love you much to give you so great a part in his suffering.” Jesus freely chose to OBEY even unto death, consciously atoning for the sin of the first son, Adam, which was a sin of disobedience. According to Aquinas, “Christ knew what obedience was from all eternity, but he learned obedience in practice through the severities he underwent particularly in his passion and death.”⁶

9and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

For he overcame death, hell and the grave! Obviously, Christ as God could not increase in perfection. Nor could his sacred humanity become any holier. From the moment of his conception, he had the “fullness of grace,” the maximum degree of holiness a man could have. However, through his passion, Christ achieved a special glorification of his body, the same as man shall participate in when raised from the dead in glory. Obedience is essentially docility to what God asks of us, and readiness to listen to him. Christ’s obedience is a source of salvation for us; if we imitate him we will truly form one body with him and he will be able to pass on to us the fullness of his grace.⁶ This obedience includes the use of the sacraments which perfect our covenantal life with him. Moses sprinkled blood on Israel on Sinai to symbolize their covenant bond with Yahweh and Jesus sheds his blood on the Cross and gives us the one cup of his blood in the Eucharist which he describes as “the blood of the new covenant.” Covenants are family blood bonds, which are indissoluble, that is, one of the parties must die to end it. In order to introduce the new covenant with mankind, Jesus had to die to the old covenant and rise to new life and a new covenant. Jesus’ death not only freed us from the old covenant, it is also the source of all the grace-filled sacraments of our new covenant. We enter this covenant through Baptism.¹ When the author writes of “eternal” salvation, it has to do with realities that endure because they belong to the heavenly sphere, which is characterized by permanence, as opposed to the transitory realities of earth.⁷ This verse illustrates the role of Christ as the representative of the people for whom as high priest he offers sacrifice. His intercession was so effective that he became a source of salvation for others.¹⁰

John 12:20-33

This incident occurs after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem just before the passion.² 20Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast “Some Greeks” were either Gentile converts to Judaism or “God fearers” who were attracted to Judaism but were not circumcised. Their request for an audience with Jesus anticipates his prophecy that “all men” will be drawn to him.¹¹

21came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, Philip was probably a lifelong friend of Peter, Andrew, James, and John and, like them, a fisherman. He had a Greek name. He was most likely a disciple of John the Baptist.¹² While we know very little about him, there are a few details that tradition connects with his later life. It is believed that he worked and died in Asia Minor. Philip was crucified upside down under the persecution of Domitian around 90 A.D.¹² and asked him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”

22Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew was Simon Peter’s brother. He too was a fisherman, a follower of John the Baptist and had a Greek name. He and John were the first two called by Christ. After Pentecost, he apparently worked in Scythia and the Ukraine, outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire. Around 69 A.D. he was working in Greece and was imprisoned there by the local governor whose wife was healed and converted by Andrew. His jailers had to be changed constantly since they were converted almost as soon as they were assigned. Finally, he was hung on

a cross that traditionally was in the shape of an X. He died on November 30 and is the patron saint of Russia and Scotland.¹² **then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.** The disciples consulted with one another because there was no precedent of Jesus dealing with Gentiles. It is possible that Philip understood Greek and was able to act as an interpreter. If that were the case, then this is a very important moment because it means that people of a non-Jewish culture came in search of Christ, which would make them the first-fruits of the spread of the Christian faith in the Hellenic world. This would make it easier to understand our Lord's exclamation in v.23 about his own glorification which had to do not only with being raised up to the right hand of the Father but also with his attracting all men to himself.¹²

23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man In Jewish tradition the Son of Man was the great ruler, installed in service directly by God, who would usher in an age of peace and prosperity.⁴ **to be glorified.** "The hour has come" was a decisive turning point in the Gospel narrative, when the awaited "hour" of Jesus (which was so often mentioned as being "not yet" in the first eleven chapters) has finally arrived. The inquiry of the Greeks sets this in motion, indicating that the forthcoming suffering of Jesus will secure blessings not only for Israel but for the whole world.¹¹

24 Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. As a planted seed must decay before it sprouts new life, so Jesus must endure death to bring us eternal life. This principle also holds true for disciples (us) who must die to themselves to receive the fullness of life from God and be channels of life to others.¹¹

25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates ("Hates" is a Semitism for loves less.)⁷ **his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.** It is a paradox that the meaning of life often eludes the man who thinks he is living it to the hilt. Selfishness, man's false love for himself that will not permit him to sacrifice himself, ends in destroying him. Only by treating his life as worthless from a this-worldly view does man gain the only life that really counts.⁷

26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The principle of sacrifice, which is the explanation of Christ's life, also holds for anyone who counts himself as a true follower of Christ.⁷ **The Father will honor whoever serves me.** The imitation of Christ is the standard of Christian perfection.⁷

27 I am troubled now. In the face of an imminent and cruel death, Jesus can and does feel anguish.⁷ **Yet what should I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.**

28 Father, glorify your name." This is Jesus' final answer from his crisis of spirit, and it is a whole-hearted acceptance of the Father's will.⁷ **Then a voice came from heaven,** Three times the Father speaks to Jesus from heaven. Each occurrence is a witness to the divine person and commission of the Son. The Jews expected the Messiah to fulfill all the great offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. The voice at his Baptism establishes the Son as an anointed and honored Priest by John the Baptist, who was appropriately a descendant of Aaron the High Priest. On the Mount of Transfiguration the Son is confirmed as a prophet with the Father's words "Listen to Him!" And now as he is shown to be the new David in John 10 and enters Jerusalem as the king of Israel in John 12, he is confirmed as King.¹³ **"I have glorified it and will glorify it again."** This is a reference to the entire lifework and teaching of Jesus, all of which have been "signs" of the ultimate glorification that is to come.⁷

29 The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

³⁰Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come for my sake but for yours. Jesus did not need this reassurance. The fact that the voice was wasted on the crowd merely confirms that they are not attuned to the word of God.⁷

³¹Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. While it will appear that Christ has been defeated by this world, in reality, the power of Satan will be broken. John does not say that Satan will be destroyed, but that he will no longer be the ruler of the world except to the extent that man’s evil disposition will permit.⁷

³²And when I am lifted up from the earth, The crowd understands that this refers to his death but they do NOT understand that it also refers to his glorification.⁷ I will draw everyone to myself.” His death makes universal salvation possible.⁷

³³He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) The Commentary Notes of Tim Gray, (2) “Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 1997” by Lawrence E. Mick, (3) “The Bread Of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (4) “Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 2005” by Aelred R. Rosser, (5) “The Books Of Jeremiah And Baruch” by Carroll Stublmuehler, C.P., (6) “The Navarre Bible: Hebrews,” (7) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (8) “Letters To A Brother Priest” by Fr. Vincent Martin Lucia and Msgr. Josefino Ramirez, (9) “Bible Basics” by Steve Kellmeyer, (10) “The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Hebrews” by George W. MacRae, S.J., (11) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (12) “The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary” by C. Bernard Ruffin, (13) “The Gospel of St. John, A Catholic Bible Study,” by Stephen K. Ray and (14) “Amazing Grace For Those Who Suffer” by Jeff Cavins & Matthew Pinto.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.