

Sunday, March 18, 2018

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 5.5-10; John 12.20-33

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We often talk about the Lenten journey being one of traveling with Jesus toward Jerusalem. With each week, we get closer and closer. The tone of the readings become more and more explicit, more and more urgent, revealing more and more about what we can expect. Well, today, just one week out from Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, our readings – the Gospel in particular – stomp on the accelerator, barrel headlong toward Jerusalem, and then take a sharp turn right into the gates of Jerusalem, coming to a screeching halt just shy of the venue for the Last Supper.

Okay, so we haven't actually gotten to the triumphal entry and to Holy Week just yet. That's next Sunday. But admittedly, in the final couple of weeks of Lent, things get a little confusing. To prepare us, our readings hop in and out of Holy Week giving us glimpses of what to expect. Like dipping our toe in the water before diving in head first. In today's passage from John's Gospel, Jesus is already in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. It is actually the day before what we now know as Maundy Thursday. The town is crowded with people from all over the Mediterranean region who have come to celebrate Passover. Some Greeks approach one of Jesus' disciples and say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12.21). News of these Greeks makes its way to Jesus. Rather than saying, "Sure, bring 'em on over," or "Sorry, now's not a good time," Jesus responds with "The hour has come for the Son to be glorified" (Jn 12.23). What??? This undoubtedly takes everyone in earshot aback. What is he talking about? This revelation that "the hour has come" is certainly unexpected. Up until now, Jesus has repeatedly told his disciples his hour has NOT yet come.

When he says his hour has come, Jesus is of course talking about the time when he would – as he puts it elsewhere in John's Gospel – fulfill the will of the Father who sent him. Jesus' statement, an unlikely and unexpected response to a request to see him, is his first explicit prediction of his Passion in John's Gospel. There have been subtle and not-so-subtle allusions to his fate, but this is the first time he has out and out spoken of his impending glorification. While those hearing may not completely know what this entails, we are able to look back and see that his glorification is what we will witness during Holy Week, and indeed throughout Eastertide. His Passion and death during Holy Week. His resurrection on Easter. And his ascension 40 days later.

The appearance of the Greeks wanting to see Jesus, particularly at this precise moment in Jesus' life and ministry is no small thing. It is not an accident. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus has, with a few exceptions, ministered almost exclusively to Jews. But at this point – at this very moment, really – the Jewish authorities are busy plotting his death. And now, at the moment when the leaders of his own people are plotting against him, when his life turns toward his Passion, when the most significant event of his ministry is about to happen, it is Greeks – Gentiles – who come to Jesus. And as he faces a turning point in his life and ministry – the turning point toward his Passion – the request of these Greeks also marks a turning point

for Jesus. And for all of us. Their coming is a sign that his ministry is to extend beyond the existing covenant with Israel. That a new covenant is in the works. A new covenantal relationship through Jesus that is extended to all people. Perhaps it was this coming of the Greeks that served as some sort of personal revelation to Jesus letting him know that his hour had come.

After this revelation, Jesus launches into his last public dialogue before the Last Supper, attempting to give some explanation, if not of the actual events themselves, at least what they will mean. To describe his Passion, Jesus uses a metaphor that would have been easily understood by the people of this primarily agrarian society – the natural life cycle of a grain of wheat. That a seed, when planted in the earth essentially dies. But in the death of the seed, new life emerges. From the single seed comes a new plant, with many stalks that will produce many more kernels of grain. It is necessary for the seed to die in order to produce great abundance of fruit. Just as a kernel of wheat produces fruit when it dies, so must Jesus die to bring forth the fruit that is the salvation of the world.

The imagery Jesus uses contains a promise and renewed hope. Jesus' use of the image of seeds dying turns the seeming disaster of his death into the promise of an abundant harvest. Abundant in that the produce will be eternal life. And abundant in that all God's beloved children – Jews and Gentiles – will be gathered into and become recipients of that abundant harvest.

Even though he knows what is supposed to happen, it is still apparently a bit unnerving for Jesus, for he exclaims, "Now my soul is troubled" (Jn 12.27a). The full realization that the moment to which his life has been building, the fulfillment of his work, which will only be accomplished through his death, is now here. Even so, Jesus does not hesitate in his response: "No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (Jn 12.27b). And in his faithfulness to his life, his ministry, his very purpose, he receives confirmation. A voice declaring that the Father has already glorified his name, and is about to do so yet again through Jesus' sacrificial act.

The unknown author of Hebrews seeks to explain Christ's sacrificial act, his purpose, using the image of a high priest "according to the order of Melchizedek." Of course you all remember good ole Melchizedek from Genesis. He was the King of Salem and high priest of "God Most High" who blessed Abram, granting him favor and protection, particularly in Abram's attempts to settle in Canaan where he was running into trouble from other local kings. In return, Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all he had. Now the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness." And it was this high priest who interceded on behalf of Abram and his people, thereby giving them access to God's forgiveness. In many ways, this really paved the way for the covenantal relationship between God and the descendants of Abram, rendering Abraham as righteous.

At the time of Melchizedek, the role of the high priest was to reveal God to the people, to mediate between God and the people, to intercede with God on their behalf, and to perform sacrifices on behalf of the people. In his sacrifice, Christ serves in the role of high priest by revealing God to us in himself; to mediate between God and us, particularly in that our intercessions and petitions go through him, as evidenced by how we often conclude our prayers

“through Jesus Christ our Lord”. While we don’t offer sacrifices in the temple, our prayers are a form of sacrificial offering to God. And Christ, through his own death on the cross, is himself the ultimate sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Just as Melchizedek mediated a covenant between God and Abram, it is Christ, serving as our great high priest who, through his sacrifice, mediates a new covenant between God and his beloved children. A new covenant between God and us.

With the events of the past few minutes, Jesus is now clearer than ever. The time has come to bring about that new covenant long anticipated by God’s people. Even since the time of Jeremiah. As we heard God’s promise: “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” (Jer 31.31). Only this will not just be a new covenant with Israel and Judah, but with all nations.

Jesus responds to the realization that the hour has come to bring the new covenant to fruition by vowing “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12.32). There is so much in this statement. As John Calvin noted in his commentary on this passage, “Though he alludes to the form of his death, yet he means generally that his death will not be a division to separate him” from us, but will be the means of “*drawing* earth upwards toward heaven” (quoted in *Synthesis*, Lent 5, March 18, 2018). Jesus’ death will not be cause for separation from him, but of our becoming closer to him. For in his being lifted up, we too are lifted up. As another commentator notes, when “Jesus says, ‘when I am lifted up . . .’ this is . . . more than the crucifixion. This is an ultimate human and spiritual desire to be lifted up from the darkness, sorrows, debts, daily chores, disappointments, failures and even deaths . . . from this world” (*Synthesis*, Lent 5, March 18, 2018).

Jesus is clear that his sacrifice, being lifted up – on the cross, through his death, through his resurrection – is the only way in which he will defeat the ruler of this world – sin and death – and thereby draw all of humanity to himself. Saving them. Redeeming them. Giving them new life.

Saving us. Redeeming us. Giving us new life. So now, on to Jerusalem.