

ECHOING GOD'S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 17, 2024

SCRIPTURES READINGS:

Jeremiah 31:31-34	God will make a spiritual covenant with his people.
Hebrews 5:7-9	In obedience to the Father, Jesus became our Savior.
John 12:20-33	In his death, Jesus is glorified by the Father.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

John:

Philip and Andrew are the only two apostles who have Greek names. Being from Galilee, where there was a strong mixture of cultures, races, and religions, they were most likely Greek-speaking Jews and not necessarily of Gentile racial or religious background. The *Greeks* who approach Philip and ask to be introduced to Jesus are most likely Gentiles, though. They probably were asking for an interpreter or at least for an emissary who would bridge the cultural divide which often kept Greek-speaking Jews apart from those who spoke Aramaic, let alone Jews from Gentiles.

Jesus confronts these Greek-speaking apostles with a message that they are apparently to deliver to the Gentiles: You are welcome to approach the Son of Man as long as you are willing to join him in his Passion and death. In the Greek and Roman world, death was the ultimate enemy. It was to be shunned at all costs. Jesus asks that the world embrace death with him, in order to share in the new life that God will grant to those who are willing to obey this final invitation.

Now is the “hour” to which Jesus has been destined. It is time for the final showdown between the lifegiving power of God and the death-dealing power of evil. God’s power will triumph in the resurrection of Christ.

In the Semitic languages, the only way to express comparisons is to state the extremes. To *hate* means to *love less*. To *hate* our lives in this world means that we prefer God’s will to our own; we put God ahead of the self.

The prayer of Jesus, which follows his instruction on surrendering everything to God, functions much like the Prayer in the Garden in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus finally accepts his mission and will enter into the glory of the Father. *The world*, which means everything essentially hostile to God in John, will be defeated.

Jeremiah:

The prophets of ancient Israel all called for a rededication of the nation to the Covenant. Jeremiah does the same. Only when the people have re-appropriated the terms of the Covenant, and the nation in its everyday functioning, will God relent and dwell with the people again in love and security. But now, Jeremiah calls for an internalization of the Covenant. Let it not be merely in external practices of worship or only in the official documents of the kingdom. It now needs to be “written on the heart.” In the Bible, the *heart* is the symbolic center of thinking and of willing, of knowing and of deciding. Commitments are made in the *heart*. For Jeremiah, the terms of the Covenant are still the same. God will be faithful; the nation must be faithful. Christians have been fond of this passage since it refers to a *new covenant*. In the death and resurrection of Christ, the Covenant has been renewed on behalf of all who will put their trust in Jesus.

Hebrews:

Blest are we that Jesus Christ is one with us fully in our humanity. Only thus can we be saved by his dying and rising. Knowing the fullness of his humanity gives us confidence that our human nature can be transformed into glory even in the midst of our suffering and dying. Jesus *learned obedience* in his suffering. We know that it can be true for us also. We are cleansed and perfected in the crucible of pain at times. This section in Hebrews tells us that Jesus turned to the Father in prayer when he experienced the trials and tribulations inherent in his humanity. He becomes the model for us as we need to take refuge in prayer to connect ourselves with his pain and his triumph.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How do you experience the *New Covenant* of which Jeremiah wrote? Do you have a personal awareness that God has addressed you as an individual and called you to enter into the divine Family through Jesus Christ the Lord? How is the death and resurrection of Jesus made real in your life today? Do you have a notion that you were involved when Jesus was lifted up on the cross and on Easter Sunday?

2. Have you (or your family or your parish community) ever known the truth of the saying “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?” Has there ever been an event of suffering, of surrender, of letting go, that has resulted in major spiritual growth? (Some parishes have lost their church buildings through fire or closure or have lost their parish priest and pastor through a sudden departure.)

3. Share with your group how, over the years, God has sought you out time and time again for a renewal of covenant with you. How have you been able to see the loving hand of God in the events that were so painful? Have you ever had doubts that God was present all the time, holding you up? Could you always see the trusting face of Jesus Christ and hold on to him for guidance and reassurance?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

In this last full week before Holy Week, ask your family or your faith-sharing group to help you review and assess the status of your Lenten spiritual journey. Let others suggest to you how you have been renewed in your covenant commitment to God.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Lord, grant that your Church be lifted up with you in glory!

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

In the Catholic tradition, we are often confused at the question asked by evangelical Protestants, “Are you saved?” We are annoyed by the implication of the question: Only if we have been “born again” according to their understanding of salvation can we be saved. To be saved can be achieved only in a sudden, dramatic, life-altering experience of conversion, which is conscious, deliberate and willingly accepted.

We do no better with the Catholic version of all this: “Outside the Church, there is no salvation.” By the time we are able to explain that one cannot be saved if that person consciously and deliberately rejects the Church as the ordinary means of salvation for those to whom this truth has been revealed, we have lost the point of the discussion.

It is better that we start at the very beginning of the all the premises and presuppositions. Jesus Christ is our salvation. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “Nor is there salvation in any other name [than Jesus’]” (Acts 4:12).

Our faith teaches us that the Church is the medium, the instrument, the sacrament of our salvation. It is in the Church community that the word of God is proclaimed by which we come to believe, to have faith, and come to salvation in Jesus Christ. It is in the Church that we have access to the sacraments, beginning with baptism, whereby we enter into the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Salvation won for us by Christ is applied to us and appropriated (received and internalized) by us each time we celebrate as a community of faith with Jesus present in our midst. Our salvation, already given us by the power of the Holy Spirit through faith and baptism, is renewed in us whenever we repent of having sinned, when we pray, when we commit ourselves to serving Christ in the poor, etc.

Christ is Savior of the Church which is his body, sharing in his holiness and made acceptable to God by having been immersed into the bath of his death (Ephesians 5:23; 5:24- 25). The Church is cleansed by Christ in a washing with water in his word (Ephesians 5:26, etc.). The command of Christ proclaimed among us in the holy Scriptures brings about our rebirth in the Lord Jesus.

Salvation is always the work of the divine initiative and decision. Salvation is the work of God’s mercy and not the result of our energy. It is always a work of God’s grace (Ephesians 2:5; Titus 2:11).

See: The Catechism of the Catholic Church: # 124
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