

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year B

Jer 31:31-34

Ps 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15

Heb 5:7-9

Jn 12:20-33

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Most of us love something brand new – the smell of the interior of a new car with its brilliant finish that glistens in the sun before receiving its first ding and couple of scratches. We also love terms that are written in our favor that are in a real sense “fail proof.” That is the sense of today’s first reading from the prophet Jeremiah. Covenants were ancient pacts usually entered into between unequals. The relationship brought obligations in exchange for protection and privileges. In the case of Israel, the pact was simple: “You will be my people; I will be your God.” But there were also clear terms: “Keep my commandments.” Last Sunday’s 1st reading from Chronicles reminded us that the priests and people of Israel routinely disobeyed the commandments and “added infidelity to infidelity.” The old terms of the covenant were simply too hard to live up to even with the best of intentions because of human weakness. The ten commandments simply exposed our vulnerability. It’s not enough to be told right from wrong; we need the will power, the strength, the help and grace to do it. The new covenant has been rigged in our favor. Jeremiah tells us that “it will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers....for they broke my covenant.” The commandments are no longer written in stone making impossible demands on us but are written on our hearts. “No longer will they have need to teach their friends and family how to know the Lord. All from least to greatest, shall know me.” (Jer. 31:34) We who are baptized disciples know Jesus, not just formally through instruction but existentially through word and sacrament by being members of his body, the Church.

Last week we were told that Nicodemus went out to meet Jesus at night time in the dark for fear of being seen with Jesus, no doubt. This weekend we have repeated our annual springtime ritual of moving the clocks ahead one hour in order to lengthen our daylight hours. In today’s Gospel we are encouraged to identify with the Greeks who dare to approach Jesus’ disciples: “Sir, we should like to see Jesus.” Isn’t that why we are here in church today? We want to see and hear Jesus. In a real sense Jesus uses his disciples as a conduit for relating to others. He still uses the Church as the ordinary way to see and hear him. The Greeks sought out the only two disciples having Greek names. Philip went to Andrew who in turn came to inform Jesus. Then follows very disturbing words that we never really want to hear: “I solemnly assure you, unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it just remains a grain of wheat.” We don’t want to die. We don’t want to let go. We cling to our many securities and wants that give us a false sense of comfort. We don’t want to suffer or be misunderstood. We don’t want to lose control. We want to be appreciated. We don’t want to be taken advantage of. We want to get our way. It is so hard to concede to the wishes of others. Yet Lent and Holy Week is a powerful reminder there is no escaping this. People will misunderstand us, misjudge us

and take full advantage of us. We can choose either to accept this by dying to selfish interests or we can become so embittered and angry that all we are left with is our self. John transposes the Agony of Jesus in the Garden to this scene: “My soul is troubled now, yet what should I say – Father, save me from this hour?” The formula that Jesus gives us for attaining peace in the midst of suffering and injustice is counterintuitive: “Whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.”

The second reading from Hebrews reminds us why Christ and Christ alone is the perfect high priest. Clear allusion is made to his suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane: “he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God, who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.” He did not give into despair much less to feelings of revenge wanting to strike back and get even for this singular injustice. He, Jesus, the misunderstood and suffering servant, became the source of eternal salvation, not some great philosophical teaching or “new wave” meditation technique. We need to focus on the mind and attitude of Jesus as we relive once again the final trials of his earthly life in order to fortify ourselves as we confront our own struggles.

The new covenant promised in the first reading should instill us with great hope. It means the outcome is guaranteed in our favor. It means any experience of injustice will not be the last word. We taste this destiny every time we partake of the Eucharist. We unite ourselves so inseparably to Christ that we put on the mind and even will of Christ where his destiny becomes the pledge and promise of our own as well.