

DYING TO SELF

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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:10-17, Hebrews 5:7-9, John 12:20-33.

The readings for this Sunday are hard readings, not just because they challenge us, if we allow them to do so, but because if we read them out of context, they can be misunderstood. The passage from the prophet Jeremiah is the only place in the Old Testament in which a 'New Covenant' is mentioned. Over the centuries, the language of new covenant has often been taken as a kind of cancellation of the old covenant, and so, for some people it is seen, unfortunately, as a justification for anti-semitism. In the context of Jeremiah, however, it is first of all a promise of a powerful renewal of God's covenant with the people of Israel, a restoration of their relationship with God after the exile to Babylon. Jeremiah is telling a shattered people that God has not forsaken them, but will soon make a new and more intimate covenant with them. The original covenant which God made with Moses was made with the whole people, represented by an individual...Jeremiah says the days are coming when the conversion of the **individual** heart will be what counts, not a collective responsibility. It was only much later, when the early followers of Jesus were looking for language to express the renewal of life with God that they had found in the life of the new Christian community, that they gave Jeremiah's words a new dimension.... For them, the last supper in which Jesus referred to his own self-sacrifice as '**the new covenant**', became one of the ways of speaking about their new life of Christian conversion; of salvation through the Cross and Resurrection.

In the psalm we read together we find an expression of the longing of the human soul for a new and deeper relationship with God. such beautiful language in the words: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me....' A recognition of our sinfulness, of our having turned away from God, and a desire for God's forgiveness...and restoration.

Then in the Hebrews passage the writer recalls Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion...his very human struggle with two desires, the immediate one being to avoid suffering, and the more long-term desire... to do His Father's will. We are reminded of the prayerful obedience of Jesus...when the author says that Jesus was 'made perfect' by the obedience he learned through suffering, but it is not as if Jesus had some flaws that needed fixing, or ignorance that needed to be rectified. The point is rather that, in taking on the human condition so fully, even to the point of rejection and physical suffering, he was made perfect in his **role as mediator** between God and humanity... that the sacrificial self-giving and the dying process made him the perfect go-between.

Our focus is drawn towards the Gospel reading today, in which the whole passage emphasizes the meaning and the cost of discipleship ... Jesus reveals the purpose for which he came...and that the hour for him to be glorified has come...The suffering and death which Jesus is about to go through will be his hour of glorification...and indeed such suffering will be the source of transformation for all who follow Jesus. Through his death and resurrection, God's eternal purpose will be fulfilled. The text tells us that among those going up to the Passover Festival were some Greeks, who tell the disciple Philip that they wish to **see** Jesus...we need to remember that since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead only a few days earlier, his fame had spread rapidly and the Pharisees (in verse 19) had just said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing.... Look, the world has gone after him!!' Jesus' response to the request of the Greek visitors is surprising, as he seems to ignore their request ... but he answers it in verse 32 where he says: 'and I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself'. In this gospel writer's terms, to **see** means to **believe**...Jesus' comment is prophetic in that he refers both to his coming crucifixion, in which he will be lifted up... but also to the Resurrection which will follow. One of the great lessons of Christ's passion, which is also one of life's lessons, is that love and suffering go together... in fact not only do they go together, but at times they are difficult to distinguish from one another. Perhaps that is why we shed tears of sorrow, but also tears at times of great joy...the two emotions are closely linked. The well known author, C.S. Lewis, puts it very simply: 'To love at all, is to be vulnerable'. Once we begin to love, we open ourselves to pain...to love as Christ loved, is painful. Total unselfishness is the beginning of 'death'...death to the self... Jesus says 'It is for this reason that I have come to this hour'... **THIS IS HIS PURPOSE!** to sacrifice his life, in obedience to the Father, for the whole of humankind.

The reference to the grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying in order to bear fruit is a deep and beautiful symbol of suffering, death, and new life. As I prepared for this time today I thought much about this, and the way a wheat seed falls, dies, and is transformed into new life. Figuratively, there are many self-deceptions, or perhaps sometimes, they can be called addictions, which, often well-hidden from others, and even from ourselves, cause us, like the wheat seed, to fall to the ground. The grace of God, through prayer and quiet surrender, can enable us to let go of our own self-deceptions and to grow in God's image. The wheat seed falls in a quiet place... it remains hidden, covered with soil. It has to die in order to be changed. We too experience a kind of death in our moments of loneliness, rejection, sorrow, disappointment and failure.... resentment, hatred, and isolation. These forty days of Lent are a season in our year when as Christians we are invited to renew and deepen the personal disciplines of prayer, self-denial... and penitent reflection. Lent is a season when there is a shift in focus from one which is outward and communal to one which is more inward and personal. Perhaps today this reading is inviting each of us to consider

for ourselves and acknowledge before God those personal deceptions that blind us to the truth, and which can distort and compromise our relationships.

Reflection.

**Each of us is like a grain of wheat planted by God.
Just as a grain of wheat must die so as to produce a harvest,
So we must die to self in order to bear the fruits of love.
This dying to self is a gradual process
And happens in little ways.
Every act of humility involves dying to pride.
Every act of courage involves dying to cowardice.
Every act of kindness involves dying to cruelty.
Every act of love involves dying to selfishness.
Thus the false self dies, and the true self,
Made in God's image, is born and nurtured.
It is by giving that we receive;
It is by forgiving that we are forgiven;
It is by dying that we are born to eternal life.**

May the spirit of Jesus guide and strengthen us today and during this coming week, so that we may joyfully make the sacrifices he asks of each one of us. May we also find His life and his peace as we come to receive Him in the Eucharist with open hearts and open hands. **Amen.**