

## **SERMON FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR B**

Heavenly Father, give us faith to receive your word, understanding to know what it means, and the will to put it into practice; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I have been asked this week whether we would be celebrating St. Patrick this week/today, as St. Patrick's Day is the 17<sup>th</sup> of March. Unfortunately, saint's days can't replace a Sunday in the season of Lent and Patrick is not considered a major festival in the Anglican Church, which means we observe the Fifth Sunday in Lent this week. Which I would like to suggest is a good thing, as our readings give us a great deal to digest as we come close to our Paschal celebration in two weeks' time.

The context of our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah was a disastrous time in Israel's history. There had been a few brief times when the kingdom of Judah had good leaders who led the people into prosperity and peace. But more often than not, it was plagued by weak and reckless leaders. Jeremiah and the other prophets of his time had repeatedly told the people and kings that without faithfulness to God who had brought the nation into being in the first place, the nation would not survive. Yet still they refused to listen.

As the Israelites faced the reality of an imminent invasion by the mighty Babylonian empire, Jeremiah brought some of the most powerful messages of hope in all of Scripture.

Jeremiah tells the nation that it will be God's plan to establish a new covenant with the people of Israel.

Rather than written in stone or taught to one another, Jeremiah promised a new covenant that would be different from the covenant that had been given when Moses received the law on Mt. Sinai. This new covenant would not be written on tablets of stone, but rather would be written on the people's hearts.

This passage from Jeremiah is one of many in the Old Testament that show us God's willingness to forgive instead of punishing humanity. This forgiveness comes simply because God chooses to offer it, with no conditions and no fine print. This does not mean that God approves of sin, or that sin does not matter. For the people of Judah, sin brings exile. But exile is not the end of the story of God's relationship with his people. The future, God's future, would eventually bring forgiveness and restoration.

And then in our Gospel for today, we read how among those who went up to worship at the festival of the Passover were some Greeks, who came to Philip, one of the twelve, and asked "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Just who the Greeks are, how many there are and why they are there is not clear. Philip takes the request to Andrew. It may be that these two are approached because they have Greek names.

Also, John doesn't say whether the Greeks actually meet Jesus. Rather, the request from the Greeks sees Jesus launch into a speech about his coming death and his 'hour'. "The hour" has been an important theme throughout John. For the first time in John's gospel the hour has come. Jesus' 'hour' is the moment of his glory. But the "glory" that Jesus speaks of is not what we might think of a glory. It is not Olympic glory, or winning an AFL flag, or winning an election or anything that the world thinks of as glory. Because for Jesus, his glory will come when he is lifted up on the cross, which to the world sees as a horrifying defeat.

Jesus describes himself as a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying in order to bear much fruit. As we know, in order for a seed to produce, it has to die in order to bring new life. A seed that does not die cannot accomplish anything. But by its death a seed multiplies its purpose.

Jesus next announces, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life". Again, this is not what we would expect to be said by someone who is about to be glorified, and it is certainly not what the world promises.

When Jesus talks about loving and hating life, it is not "self-hatred," but more like thinking about the greater good before your own wants or desires. Jesus says that those who do not reject the world view of the present age will, like the material things they love, eventually pass away. Those who realize there is more to this life than what the world offers will enjoy something greater than what this world can ever possibly offer.

It has been suggested that the coming of the Greeks symbolizes the drawing of all people to Jesus. The Greeks see Jesus in so much as the Greeks represent the church's future mission to go beyond the confines of the people who are already there and take the good news into the wider world.

As in the reading from Jeremiah, so in our gospel reading too we see Jesus witness to the same God revealing himself as a God who is not willing that any should perish, but that all people should be in relationship with God. Jesus dies, not to appease God's anger over human sinfulness, but because he shows how much God wishes to be in relationship with us.

Our readings for today suggest that the God we worship, unlike we so often do, does not hold grudges. God is a God of second chances, who is willing to commit himself and to make new covenants with humanity even in the face of resistance and even rejection.

Too often we see the concept of covenant as a set of doctrines to which we must assent rather than about a set of relationships that we need to build and rebuild. As Christians, today's readings suggest that we need to see the Christian faith as a call to profound transformation, not merely a call to a particular set of beliefs.

We have a choice to either give ourselves over to the culture of violence, greed, and isolation; or to act in ways that will foster the possibility of a renewed society based on hope, love, and real community.