

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT-MARCH 21, 2021

READINGS: Jeremiah 31:31-34;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 51;

Hebrew 5:7-9;

Gospel of John 12:20-33

Lent: Renewing the Spirit of Discipleship

Last week the whole world celebrated the first anniversary of the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization. In Canada, we took a moment to remember all those who have died from the disease. We also paid tribute to all workers who have contributed to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and to all those who have contributed to the wellbeing of the people in Canada. There were inspiring stories about front line workers: health care workers who have put in long hours caring for the sick; workers who have provided us with essential service by going to work while most of us stayed home; parents who have combined their professional responsibilities with parenthood by caring for their children during the lockdown; and workers from voluntary organizations who have continued to care for the homeless, the hungry and those in need. The stories of the front-line workers reveal that they endured challenging situations in their work. We can describe these workers as embracing suffering for the sake of others.

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Today we enter the beginning of the last phase of Lent, traditionally known as Passiontide. As followers of Christ, we reflect on the spiritual significance offered by today's readings. The readings speak about our call to embrace suffering for the sake of others. We begin with the first reading from the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom, Judah, before and during the Babylonian exile (587 BC-537 BC). At the time Jeremiah was prophesying, the northern kingdom, Israel, no longer existed. However, today's oracle of the prophet begins with, "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". This means that the new covenant was to include everyone and not only the people of the house of Judah. During his ministry, Jeremiah had proclaimed a message of doom and death. He had foretold the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem if the people didn't change their ways. Eventually his people were taken into Babylonian captivity because of their disobedience.

Today's passage is from a part of the Book of Jeremiah that provided comfort during his gloomy predictions. The prophecy was about a new covenant. The new covenant would be different from the covenant that God made with his people during their journey through the desert to the Promised Land. The giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses symbolized the old covenant. The new covenant would not be broken because it would be written on the hearts of the people not merely on tablets like the Ten Commandments. The response of the people to the new covenant would be their obedience to the law of God. In the new covenant, the

people would know God through their actions, actions of love. In the new covenant, God would forgive the iniquity of his people and he would “remember their sins no more”.

The story about a new covenant in the first reading leads us to the Gospel passage from John. For the last two weeks, we have been reading passages from John’s Gospel about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. A couple of Sundays ago we read the story of the cleansing of the Temple and last Sunday we read about Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus. Today we read about the end of Jesus’ public ministry. Today’s passage comes after Jesus had performed his mighty sign-- the raising of Lazarus from death. In fact, just before today’s passage the Pharisees had acknowledged to each other that, “the world has gone after him”. The beginning of today’s passage refers to the Passover Feast that brought many people to Jerusalem to worship God. Some of these people, Greeks, had come to the festival and wanted to see Jesus. When the two disciples went to inform Jesus about the Greeks’ request, we read that Jesus didn’t see the Greeks. Rather, Jesus decided to teach the disciples about his impending death and what his suffering and death would mean to his followers. Jesus used his impending death as an analogy to a single grain that dies in the soil and produces much fruit.

In using the expression “the person who loves their life loses it, and the person who hates their life in this world, will keep it for eternal life”, Jesus stated two facts-- one fact is of the world and the other is of his followers. First, anyone who tries to hold on to this life by making it as secure as possible must, in the end, lose it anyway. For life on this planet is short, seventy or eighty years in the Biblical estimate (Psalm 90:10). Second, since life is short, is it not better for a disciple to spend it serving Jesus. Today’s passage also acknowledged that Jesus was troubled at his impending death as he waited for his suffering. Yet, Jesus knew that his death was to be the fulfillment of his mission. In his conversation with his Father, Jesus said, “It is for this reason that I have come to this hour”. Jesus’ death would be a testimony to the Father and his own glory.

The Evangelist John’s unique style of writing was to portray Jesus as divine-- the Son of God with a mission-- a mission that involved suffering and death. At the time of the writing of the Gospel, the contemporaries of the Evangelist were going through persecution. Today’s passage was to offer them hope and to encourage the early Christians to follow the path of the Lord. The path of the Lord involved a life of suffering.

The story about the suffering and the impending death of Jesus forms the backdrop to today’s second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. The writer taught the early Christians that although Jesus is the Son of God, he “learned obedience through what he suffered”. The word “obedience” in today’s passage means “reading between the lines of the commandments, trying to discern the will of God in changing circumstances and unforeseen situations” and doing the will of God. Through his suffering and death, Jesus did the will of God. Because Jesus obeyed

God, he became the source of eternal salvation of all who obey him. To obey Jesus is therefore to follow in his footsteps.

My brothers and sisters, what do the three readings have to say to us? How are they related to the season of Lent? The new covenant in the first reading is a common theme of some of the prophets beginning with Hosea. Our Scriptures tell us that God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai and brought it to perfection in Jesus. Our Scriptures also tell us that the prophecy of the new covenant was fulfilled only through the work of Jesus Christ. Through his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus has become the new and everlasting covenant. The new covenant in Jesus is symbolized in his love for us. Jesus offered himself for us and he invites us to follow in his footsteps.

A common theme of our Lenten discipline is that we deny ourselves for the sake of others. The examples of the actions of the front-line workers that I gave at the beginning of the homily are examples of what it means to deny oneself. The actions of these workers in challenging situations are actions of selflessness and love for the sake of others especially those who needed help. Their actions bore fruits, the fruits of hope and life.

As we continue our Lenten journey we can reflect on how it has been for us to follow the path of Jesus? Which of our Lenten observances have we found challenging to do? Lent is a time of reflection: we recognize that the law of love is written on our hearts and we work to keep the law of love faithfully. The message for today's liturgy is about discipleship. Discipleship involves embracing suffering for the sake of others. Let us ask God to renew within our hearts the spirit of discipleship. It is through our actions of selflessness that we act as disciples. These actions nurture our spiritual growth that brings the fruits of love and hope that build our communities.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong