

5th Sunday in Lent (Passion Sunday)

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; John 12:20-33; Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33: One could almost call this Sunday's Gospel lesson, "The Last Temptation of Christ"!

The Pharisees, in John 12:19 say to each other, "You see, we can do nothing! The whole world has gone after him!" That statement of intense frustration by those who would stifle Jesus' popularity would be literally fulfilled in the Gospel lesson for the lectionary for this Sunday – Passion Sunday.

This lesson begins with the words, "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus' (12:20-21)".

The Greek word here translated "Greeks" is crucial to the understanding of the import of this story. It is the Greek word that should be best translated "Gentile". It is *not* the Greek word for Jews who spoke Greek or lived in Gentile countries, nor does the world mean Greeks who were Jewish proselytes. It means "pagans", "Gentiles" – those outside the influence of the Promised People, and therefore in the eyes of the Judeans of that day, those rejected by God. These "Greeks" presumably have not come to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover festival, but specifically and intentionally to meet with "the Son of Man". Thus, it is these "non-Jewish Gentiles" who come to Philip and ask to speak with Jesus.

It is intriguing to note that the two disciples to whom they go to gain entry to Jesus have Greek names – Philip and Andrew. Did these Greeks feel they would make more headway by going to apparently Greek-influenced disciples? We do not know. But the very placing of this story at this point in the Johannine narrative serves to illustrate clearly the truth of the Pharisees' comment, "Look, the whole *world* has gone after him", for now even non-Jewish Gentiles are seeking Jesus out!

The text does not tell us whether or not these Gentiles got to see Jesus! But what did happen was a response by Jesus to their request, brought to him by Andrew and Philip – a response that seems thoroughly inappropriate! To their request that he visit with these Gentiles, Jesus responds:

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father with honor" (12:23b-26).

This is a strange response to a simple request by Gentiles to speak to Jesus! But if one puts this story in the larger context, then one can begin to perceive Jesus' anxiety and his consequent reaction.

These Gentiles were coming to ask Jesus to leave the dangers of Jerusalem and the coming inevitable final confrontation with the Jerusalem clergy aristocracy. Rather, they wanted Jesus to return with them into Gentile territory beyond Judean influence or authority. There, Jesus could be safe, and would be free and even welcomed to teach and heal as he so obviously felt led. It is intriguing that the synoptic gospels' report that Jesus spent significant time (some would estimate around one-third of his time) in Gentile territory beyond the borders of Galilee.

Thus, in these Gentiles' offer lay the way out of the death that would otherwise inevitably await Jesus if he continued his attack of the Judeans – and that, quite soon! Should he accept the offer? Would he accept the offer? Could he not now “save face” while rapidly de-escalating his conflict with the Jewish clerical aristocracy, doing so by accepting the request of a people who wanted him to teach and heal in their country and were open to having their society shaped into the kingdom of God? It must have been terribly, terribly tempting – especially to a young man who really was dreading the thought of dying (cf. Luke 22:41-46). It was, in reality, the last temptation of Christ!

Jesus rejects their offer of escape. Using the metaphor of wheat, Jesus states that it is only through his dying that humanity will live. It is only through his crucifixion that those committed to him will be birthed into a new community. If he becomes fixated upon preserving his life, Jesus observes, then all will be lost – the kingdom, the world, humanity – and even his own soul. On the other hand, if he is willing to face into his own death, then all humanity will be redeemed. This is Jesus' answer to his last temptation. To take the easy way out would be to be disobedient to that heavenly vision and call that God had given to him, not just at the beginning of his ministry, but at the very beginning of time (John 1:1-14).

It is at this point that Jesus then utters one of the most poignant lines that appear in scripture. “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (12:27).

This is one of the few places in John when you truly see into the inner anguish of the man himself. Here you see Jesus in the very raw! He is a young man – 33 years old. He doesn't want to die! He wants to go on living, serving others, building a community, healing the broken, making humanity new again. Here is the opportunity to do so. With all his heart, he wants to cry out, “Father, save me from this hour”!

But he will not utter such a cry. Jesus will stay the course. He will play out the drama that lies before him. HE *MUST* DIE! For unless he dies, there is to be no redemption of humanity.

So Jesus makes the decision to stay in unyielding confrontation with the political, economic and religious powers of both Israel and of Rome until they do their worst and destroy him. To die is his purpose in life. So he calls upon God to sustain him in what he must now do.

The text tells us that God responds verbally to Jesus. Some can't perceive the words. But Jesus can. And Jesus now knows that God reassures him that God will see Jesus through what Jesus must do!

Jesus then turns to the crowd and says something utterly stunning. “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (as: 30-32).

Jesus’ death, he is saying, will drive out “the ruler of this world”. The conventional interpretation today of the phrase “ruler of the world” is that this is a reference to Satan. However, that must be seriously questioned. First, the term “ruler of this world” as a reference to Satan is never used in the rabbinical literature contemporaneous with Jesus, nor would that term ever be used by first century rabbis for Satan – precisely because they believed with all their being that *Yahweh* was the ruler of the world! Second, it is not used in the Gospel of John as a reference for Satan; indeed, the only other places it occurs (John 3:1, 7:26, 48; 14:30), it is clearly a reference to someone other than Satan. Third, for this to be a reference to Satan would alter the whole meaning and thrust of John 11:1—12:50, which pits the struggle as not between God and Satan, but between Jesus and the Judeans.

So who is the “ruler of this world”? It is the Jewish religious aristocracy – the consistent usage of the word “ruler” throughout the Gospel of John (3:1; 7:26, 48; 14:30). It is the Sanhedrin – the Jewish “congress” of priests, Pharisees and Sadducees -- who have done everything possible to “drive out” Jesus and his community of faith. So they will be judged by the Lord of history, and will therefore discover that it is, instead, they who will be “driven out”. Jesus, on the other hand, will be “lifted up from the earth” (i.e., will be crucified), and thus, by dying on behalf of the world, “will draw all people to myself”!

Consequently, it comes down to an eternal choice, Jesus says. The choice is not simply between whether Jesus will take the “easy way out” or to act out his obedience to a God who calls him to a cross. The choice is ours, as well. Jesus says, “If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light” (12:35b-36).

Each person can choose darkness or light, the ruler of this world or Jesus. The choice is before you – to continue to be a part of the present division of power which will oppress, exploit and seek to control you (but, because you are used to it, seems most secure and stable) or to become a part of the “beloved community” of the Crucified One who is in society to return it to God’s intentions for society? The choice is now before Israel, just as it was placed before them by Moses in the book of the Hebrew Bible which best presented that vision of God’s intentions for human society: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. . . . Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (Deut. 30:15, 19b-20a).

And the choice is before each of us this Passion Sunday, as well. Do we follow the “ruler of this world”? Do we embrace their political, economic and ethical values of lust for control, oppression, greed and exploitation, of domination and of control? Do we embrace the temptation to “take the easy way out” in order to live in security, stability and apparent peace, in order to do the teaching and healing we so love to do? Or do we choose to join with the Christ and his

beloved community to obediently work for God's intentions for humanity, even if that means receiving the wrath of those "rulers of the world"? You see, it is our Passion Sunday, as well!

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the prophet's magnificent prophecy, "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more".

This passage of scripture is often interpreted by Christians to be a prediction by Jeremiah of God's intentions to replace God's covenant with Israel with a covenant with a people who would take Israel's place – the Christian church. The author of the Gospel of John argues that Jesus had come to create God's society through the beloved community, made necessary by the obvious failure of the "Judeans" to do so. But it is difficult to argue that this was what Jeremiah had in mind when he wrote this famous prophecy.

When one reads this passage in its full context, it is obvious that what Jeremiah intends to communicate is that God will act to bring about a renewed relationship between Israel and God's Self. God will do so by creating a new covenant with Israel that will be different than the one made on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19—Numbers 11). That will occur, not because the original covenant was inadequate or wrong, but because Israel had refused to obey it. And they had refused to obey it because their natural (i.e., sinful) inclination was to lust for power rather than for justice, to build their own fortunes rather than to equitably share their wealth, and to seek their own good rather than to yearn after relationship with God. Therefore, what God is about to do, Jeremiah proclaimed, is that he will begin a profound work in the hearts of the people of Israel so that, more than anything else, they would want to "know the Lord" and thus live in a way most conducive to fostering that relationship (that is, with political justice and an equitable distribution of wealth, so that humanity's need to dominate and to hoard would be eliminated). It is Israel's sins that caused the nation to collapse. But it will be God's forgiveness that will restore them back to the shalom of God and of each other.

The true importance of this passage, however, is not simply in its prophecy of a coming new covenant, but of Jeremiah's perception that God's work is always in the "not-yet". Walter Brueggemann makes an excellent distinction between the division of the world into "kings" and "prophets", "technicians" and "poets".¹ Kings and technicians are concerned with what is, with the management and control of the resources of life and even of life itself. Prophets and poets, on the other hand, center their lives in the conviction that "something enormous is about to break in on us" and thus create "images for hope".² Brueggemann then writes, "Shalom affirms that in

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 131-133.

² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

a world of kings, prophets must be heard and taken seriously; that in a world of technicians, the voice of the poet is essential for the humanness of our world”.³

“The voice of the poet is essential for the humanness of our world.” The lead singer of the rock group, U2, and now the international star who helps lead the United Nation’s effort to eliminate extreme poverty throughout the world, Bono, spoke publicly to President Bush, to the gathered members of Congress and to government, religious and business leaders at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC on February 3, 2006. This poet and prophet, speaking to kings and technicians, commended the United States for its charitable work around the world. But he then added:

“Finally, it’s not about charity after all. It’s about justice. And that’s too bad – because Americans are good at charity. We like to give, and we give a lot, even those who can’t afford it.

“But justice is a higher standard. Africa makes a fool of our idea of justice; it makes a farce of our idea of equality. It mocks our pieties, it doubts our concern, it questions our commitment.

“Sixty-five thousand Africans are still dying every day of a preventable, treatable disease, for lack of drugs we can buy at any drug store. Preventing the poorest of the poor from selling their products while we sing the virtues of the free market – that’s a justice issue. Holding children to ransom for the debts of their grandparents – that’s a justice issue. Withholding life-saving medicines out of deference to the Office of Patents – that’s a justice issue.”⁴

It is crucial that prophets speak truth to presidents, that poets speak truth to technicians. For they just may listen – and end up changing the world.

The essence of the conflict between Jesus and the political, economic and religious systems of Israel and of Rome was that they did not listen! The leaders of Judea had organized the Jewish world precisely as they wanted it organized – in a way that benefited them and maintained them in power. And Jesus came announcing the “kingdom of God” in which God would turn the values and the assumptions of the world upside down. And that was most unwelcome news to them. They were not open to any new covenant!

“A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life”, Bono concluded his talk. “In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord’s blessing on my work and my life.

And this wise man said, “Stop”. He said, “Stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Get involved in what God is doing – because it’s already blessed!”

Well, God is with the poor. That, I believe, is what God is doing. And that is what he’s calling you and me to do!”⁵

³ Ibid., p. 133.

⁴ Transcript of Bono’s address, The National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, DC, February 3, 2006; pp. 4,5.

⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

Psalm 119:9-16 contains the well-known lines, “How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you” (vss. 9-11).

Psalm 119 is both the longest psalm in the Hebrew Psalter and a psalm that honors and celebrates the Law of Moses. The author of the Psalm obviously wants to make God’s Law the governing and shaping influence upon his life. The psalm is an acrostic with each of its sections beginning with a Hebrew letter. Thus, it is divided into 22 stanzas (the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet), with each stanza being eight verses. The stanza that makes up today’s Psalter lesson begins with the letter *bet* (or “B”).

The key to the understanding of this stanza is verse 11: “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you”. The Hebrew word translated “treasure” actually means “hide” or “store up”. Literally, in translation from the Hebrew, it reads “The commandments from his lips – I have certainly not veered from them; in my bosom I have treasured the words from his mouth”.

In other words, the author is saying that, if we are to live a truly fulfilled and rich life, we ought to immerse ourselves in the study and devotion of scripture (the Law). We are to commit it to memory, to submerge our psyche in it, to make it our necessary food and drink. We are to treasure it (vs. 11), to learn from it (vs. 12), to teach it (vs. 13), to delight in it (vs. 14), to meditate upon it (vs. 15), and to never allow ourselves to forget it (vs. 16). If we so inundate and submerge ourselves in the scriptures, so that it becomes bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, then we will keep our way pure, we will center our heart upon Yahweh and we will not stray from living and acting out our lives in God and in the realization of God’s kingdom – the shalom community! This is the sure foundation upon which every young man or woman should build their lives – and old folk, as well!

Hebrews 5:5-10 is the closely reasoned argument by this unknown Christian author that examines what it was about Jesus’ death that made it redemptive. He begins by presenting an argument from the Hebrew Bible that supports his contention that Jesus was appointed by God to be the world’s high priest. The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 2:7 (“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”) and 110:4 (“You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek”). The introduction of the figure of Melchizedek is crucial to the author’s argument.

Melchizedek is mentioned only in Genesis 14:18-20 and Psalm 110 in the Hebrew Bible, and only in Hebrews (5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10-11, 15, 17) in the New Testament. He was the king of Salem (the predecessor city to Jerusalem) in Genesis as well as a “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18b). His importance is emphasized by the fact that Abram (later, changed to Abraham) submits himself to the authority of Melchizedek and does obeisance – something Abram’s status requires of no other monarch he meets!

Why is Melchizedek so honored? Psalm 110 presents the argument that Melchizedek is both the ideal king who is superior even to David, and the ideal priest who mediates directly between God's people and God (I Kings 8; Ps. 132:9-10). That priesthood is eternal (Ps. 110:4a), and therefore transcends both the Aaronic and Levitical priesthoods. Being both the king of justice and of shalom and as an eternal priest, Melchizedek is the best "type" of the Son of God – whose royal, holy, high priesthood transcends all other political, economic and religious orders!

That is precisely the argument the author of Hebrews builds in this passage. Jesus, that author argues, is God's eternal high priest as typified in Melchizedek. Jesus is the divine king greater than David, God's son who, by being God's son, is qualified both to be the high priest who makes the sacrifice for sin and at the same time the sacrifice itself that will atone for the sins of Israel and of the world.

But how does Jesus make atonement for the world's sins? He does so, Hebrews states, through his suffering. He prayed fervently for deliverance from death (cf. John 20:27) because, as an authentic human being, he no more sought death than any of us world. He "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (5:7). His prayer was answered by God, not by his avoiding of death but through his resurrection from the dead!

The author of Hebrews then moves on to an intriguing wordplay with which he identifies the redemptive element in Christ's sacrificial death. He writes, "Although he was a Son, Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). The Greek word translated "learned" is *emathen* and the word "suffered" is *epathen*. Jesus' *learned* obedience (his natural inclination as a human was to survive; he had to *learn* to obey God's call to him against all logic and survival instincts) cancelled the disobedience of Adam (who represents the entire human race, Rom. 5:19) and thus qualifies Jesus to act as God's eternal high priest (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). It was his obedience (cf. John 12) that actually brought about the atonement of humanity because, through that learned obedience, he fulfilled God's redemptive plan for humanity. Thus, "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (5:9) by being in his actions and obedience, "a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (vs. 10). That was the significance of what Jesus did when he decided to "stay the course" in John 12:20-33.

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle B Lent 5.doc)