

Fifth Sunday in Lent Unless a Seed Dies

“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.” John 12:21.

Today, we have set before us, the dream of the beloved society from Jeremiah, a time when the die was cast for the death of Jesus and the explanation of the role and glorification of Jesus Christ. It sets us on the path liturgically toward Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter. On this fifth Sunday in Lent 2009, I ask you, “Why did Jesus have to die and how did Jesus’ death save us?”

I. Dreams Of A New Covenant-Jeremiah 31:31-34

The world is a far cry from what it ought to be, but Jeremiah had a vision of a new world order. He envisioned a new covenant being made with the house of Judah and Judah’s heirs. It would not be a Covenant of laws to be broken like in the time of the ancestors, but a covenant instilled in the heart, ushering forth into a new creation with different relationships and correct behavior. One would not have to wear a phylactery of laws and words on the wrist or forehead, because good thoughts and actions would spring forth from a pure and loving heart. One would not have to be taught the difference between right and wrong because each person would possess that knowledge intuitively.

In such a time, God will be acknowledged as God by the people; and the people will be claimed by God as God’s own. No teacher will be needed. No priest would be required. No sacrifices, necessary. No church, temple or mosque, erected. For the priest, sacrifice and church would be perfectly erected within the heart. Sin, evil and eternal death will be banished forever. Each person will know the Lord and God will be God alone.

Of course, you realize that this is a dream of an ideal community. The world has never been that way and I doubt that it will be that way in the foreseeable future. I think that it will only be possible through God’s initiative and in God’s own time. Yet, God’s people must have set before them the goal of the beloved community in order to move toward the kingdom of God upon earth. That is what Jeremiah and so many others prophets have taught us throughout the ages.

II. The New Covenant Initiated-John 12:20-33

The beginning of Jeremiah’s new vision started with Jesus. The coming of some gentile Greeks from Bethsaida signaled that beginning in earnest. They represented a sign of the inclusion of the totality of human beings. Jesus’ death was now imminent and the powers and principalities of the world by killing Jesus were sealing their own fate. Jesus said, *“Now is the judgement 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.”* John 12:32

When the Greek came to Jesus, Jesus made another pronouncement of his passion and death. Just as a seed planted in the earth does not produce unless its outer shell dies, its inner life germinates and the new life bursts forth from the earth to grow, multiply and flourish; so too must the Son of Man be lifted up or die.

Again, Jesus reminded his followers of the cost of discipleship. The Christ-bearer must be willing to witness to the fullest extent just as Jesus did. Lovers of physical life will lose life eternal. Nevertheless, she/he who is willing to lose his/her life for the sake of Christ and the gospel will gain eternal life. Service to God will require following the life, teachings and example of Jesus. And following Jesus will constitute the instrumentality through which the transforming love of God will go forth and renew the face earth. It will also seal the new covenant and establish God's rule upon earth-in God's time.

Thus, the new covenant began with Christ at the coming of the Greeks from Bethsaida and the dark night of the soul of Jesus began in earnest. His hour of glorification-the passion, cross, death, the grave and subsequently his resurrection-had come. When it will be consummated, only God knows. But there is something for us to do in the mean time.

III. Hebrews Explains The Mystery of Jesus' Glorification-Hebrews 5:5-10

The Pauline writer of Hebrews said that Jesus' glorification-his witness, passion, death, resurrection and ascension- was not a self-glorification. It was a designation from God: David said, *"You are my Son, today I have begotten you"* in Psalm 2:7. And again, *"You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."* Psalm 110:4. Like Melchizedek, the priest of Salem, Christ Jesus had his origin and departure from and into a place we humans know not. But, it is a place being prepared for us even now.

At any time, God was able to remove the bitter cup of agony from Jesus (his passion and his death), but God would not. God would not because the Cross of Calvary was and seemingly is always the end result of human resistance to God's offer of love. God's answer, nevertheless, was posited in Jesus, who chose to meet human resistance with love and forgiveness rather than hatred and destruction. For God so loved the world that he gave his Son's self-sacrifice, in order that humans may see, understand, believe and change their ways. That to me is the difference in the God of Jesus rather than the God of the Law of Moses.

Jesus was able to reject the death on the cross, but he did not. Jesus did not because he was obedient and the perfect reflection (icon if you will) of the love that God has for his world. Instead of rejecting the cross, he offer himself in humble submission to the will of God for the salvation of the world. Jesus was, therefore, designated by God as "Priest" after the order of the Melchizedek and as "Victim" after the order of the new created human in Jesus of Nazareth. No more would retaliation be admired, emulated and preferred as the eternal response to conflict between humans and humans. Jesus would set us on a new course-toward love, reconciliation and fellowship.

You may ask, "When will that time come?" I do not know, but I do know this much. Whenever and wherever Christ-bearers, being empowered by the Holy Spirit witness to the love of God, the new covenant described by Jeremiah and instituted by Jesus Christ becomes operative. Let us then be Christ-bearers to the world and new covenant makers!

IV. Epilogue

Like me, you may be asking:

1. Why did Jesus have to die? The answer to me is,

A. Jesus had to die because God is the way God is. God is love and love does not force it will by force.

B. Jesus had to die because the world is the way the world is. The world feeds on power, terror and dominance. The world seeks to destroy everything and everybody that get in its way. Jesus got in the way of corruptive power, therefore he had to die. But that death by God's action was not the end of God's story.

2. How does Jesus' death pay for my sins?

A, Jesus' death is both an example of the way love behaves that stops retaliatory violence and a sacramental or symbolic means through which we can be transformed and become transformers of a world dominated by power and terror.

3. How do we gain the power and ability to become transformed and transformers? We gain that power through baptism and the influence of the Holy Spirit.

So there you have it. Jeremiah dreamed of a new covenant. Jesus came to institute the terms of that new covenant. And you and I are called to be transformers of the world, until a time certain.

Let us pray. O God, Give us the insight, power and strength to become increasingly obedient to you will. Help us through the power of your Spirit not be conformed to this world but to be transformers of the world by the renewing of our minds, hearts and spirits. Then, O Lord, hasten the coming of your kingdom. Amen.