

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year B

21 March 2021



### Collect

By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God,  
may we walk eagerly in that same charity  
with which, out of love for the world,  
your Son handed himself over to death.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

### Readings and Commentaries

The hour is near. The climax of Jesus' work is fast approaching. The cost of his mission is growing greater by the day. The price to be paid is such that Jesus will pray "aloud and in silent tears to the one who had the power to save him out of death". In the end it becomes all too clear – the grain of wheat must be buried in the ground and die before it can yield a harvest of life.

The way ahead is the way of the cross. It is the way Jesus has trod before us, so we know it to be the path of life. The time has come for us to make our choice. Are we so in love with the life we know that we run the risk of losing it, or dare we let go of who we are and what we have in order to find life to the full?

Like the foreigners in today's gospel, we would "like to see Jesus". Our wish will be granted. We shall see the Son of Man raised on the tree of the cross. The longer and more lovingly we gaze on him there, the more we shall be drawn to him and see his glory, "the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

## A reading from the prophet Jeremiah

31:31–34

See, the days are coming - it is the Lord who speaks - when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah, but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, so I had to show them who was master. It is the Lord who speaks. No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive - it is the Lord who speaks. Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people. There will be no further need for neighbour to try to teach neighbour, or brother to say to brother, 'Learn to know the Lord!' No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest - it is the Lord who speaks - since I will forgive their iniquity and never call their sin to mind.

## First Reading

The prophet Jeremiah spent so much of his time warning of imminent disaster that his very name is synonymous with prophesying doom. And indeed, Jerusalem did fall to the Assyrians and the people taken into exile. But there is much more than this to Jeremiah as today's reading shows. He is also a prophet of hope; he announces God's promise of a new covenant.

In words that have a parallel in the prophet Ezekiel (36:26-28), he speaks of a new law which will be planted deep in human hearts. This will create a new bond between God and his people. Everyone will have an inner teacher, as it were, making God and God's ways known to them. The author of the letter to the Hebrews quotes this passage (8: 8-12), and the accounts of the last supper link the cup of blessing to the "new covenant".

The pattern of God's action is the same as that of last Sunday's first reading. Israel's failure to be true to the ancient covenant leads to the catastrophe of the exile, but this calamity serves as a time of purification and makes a fresh start possible.

The reading is in the form of a solemn pronouncement and should be proclaimed accordingly. Readers should allow the congregation time to take the terms of the promise to heart. The NRSV uses the word "husband" instead of "master" and avoids using the gender-exclusive "brother".

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 50:3–4, 12–15

**R.** Create a clean heart in me, O God.

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.  
In your compassion blot out my offence.  
O wash me more and more from my guilt  
and cleanse me from my sin. **R.**

A pure heart create for me, O God,  
put a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
nor deprive me of your holy spirit. **R.**

Give me again the joy of your help;  
with a spirit of fervour sustain me,  
that I may teach transgressors your ways  
and sinners may return to you. **R.**

## Responsorial Psalm

The psalm verses and response come from the most famous of the penitential psalms, Psalm 50/51. The psalmist's prayer – "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me" – alludes to the promises made by both Ezekiel and Jeremiah. In this context the individual who prays the psalm may be understood to do so in the name of the whole people.

While it is a prayer of repentance, the psalm does not dwell on the guilt of the transgressor. It is both a confession of sin and a confession of trust in the God who alone can bestow the blessing of "a pure heart . . . a steadfast spirit . . . the joy of your help".

The text of the verses should present no great problems for the reader; the language is clear and straightforward. There is room for the reader to vary the tone as the psalm progresses. The first verse is more repentant in tone, the remaining two more hopeful. The distinction should not be overplayed.

## **A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 5:7–9**

During his life on earth, Christ offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard. Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation.

## **A reading from the holy Gospel according to John**

**12:20–33**

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. These approached Philip, who came from Bethsaida in Galilee, and put this request to him, 'Sir, we should like to see Jesus.' Philip went to tell Andrew, and Andrew and Philip together went to tell Jesus. Jesus replied to them:

'Now the hour has come  
for the Son of Man to be glorified.  
I tell you, most solemnly,  
unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies,  
it remains only a single grain;  
but if it dies,  
it yields a rich harvest.

Anyone who loves his life loses it;  
anyone who hates his life in this world  
will keep it for the eternal life.

If a man serves me, he must follow me,  
wherever I am, my servant will be there too.

If anyone serves me, my Father will honour him.

Now my soul is troubled.

What shall I say:

Father, save me from this hour?

But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour.

Father, glorify your name!

A voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'

People standing by, who heard this, said it was a clap of thunder; others said, 'It was an angel speaking to him.' Jesus answered, 'It was not for my sake that this voice came, but for yours.

'Now sentence is being passed on this world;  
now the prince of this world is to be overthrown.  
And when I am lifted up from the earth,  
I shall draw all men to myself.'

By these words he indicated the kind of death he would die.

## **Second Reading**

The letter to the Hebrews is remarkable in its insistence on the humanity of Jesus. He is our high priest because he shared our human condition in every respect except sin (4:15), was subject to weakness (5:2), and had to learn obedience through suffering. The notion of Jesus being made perfect through suffering, thus becoming our great high priest and the pioneer of our salvation, is a recurring theme in the letter.

Today's reading consists of just two sentences. The first of these, whether deliberately intended by the author or not, cannot fail to remind us of Jesus' anguished prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. And when it is written that "his prayer was heard," we know that Jesus was not literally saved "from death" but was saved "out of death". And just as Jesus "learnt to obey", so are we called to obey him who is "the source of eternal salvation".

This passage, like the letter as a whole, is meant to offer us great encouragement. If we are daunted by the struggles that are part and parcel of being human, we can take heart that Jesus has shared them to the full and shown us the way of salvation. These are weighty considerations, and should be proclaimed with due seriousness, but the ultimate message is one of supreme hope.

## **Gospel**

John wrote his gospel in the light of the resurrection: Jesus is Lord from beginning to end. He also felt free to adopt a different chronology from the synoptic gospels. Thus in his account of Jesus' passion there is no "agony in the garden". Instead there is a hint of it here, just as there was in the reading from Hebrews. Sometime between Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem and the evening he washed the disciples' feet, he exclaims: "Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say: Father, save me from this hour?"

This passage from John is rich in associations. It harks back to the call of the first disciples, when Philip urges Nathaniel to "come and see" Jesus (1:48). The voice from heaven brings to mind God's self-revelations in the Old Testament, as well as the synoptics' stories of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (not found in John). And as was the case last Sunday, Jesus' reference to being "lifted up from the earth" echoes the story of the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:1-9), though this is not given as the first reading on either day.

Other words and phrases are packed with meaning: Jesus' "hour" encapsulates the whole mystery of his death and exaltation, and the buried grain of wheat that yields a rich harvest is another dense metaphor for the same mystery. However the climax of the reading – Jesus' declaration that when he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself – is somewhat diminished by the following comment that limits the multi-layered meaning of "lifted up" to the crucifixion alone.

## Concluding Prayer

### Prayer over the People (Fifth Sunday of Lent)

Bless, O Lord, your people,  
who long for the gift of your mercy,  
and grant that what, at your prompting, they desire  
they may receive by your generous gift.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

And may the blessing of almighty God,  
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
come down on us and remain with us for ever.  
**Amen.**

(Adapted from the Prayer over the People for the Fifth Sunday of Lent,  
Roman Missal p. 283.)