

March 21, 2021 - 5th Sunday of Lent - Sermon

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

During the years when the kingdom of Babylon was at war with the nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem was under attack the prophet Jeremiah was used by God to communicate with the people of Judah. His message was difficult to hear because it contained the fact that the reason for the threat had a good deal to do with the fact that the people had abandoned the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and chosen to worship other gods instead. At God's command Jeremiah proclaimed that the destruction of Jerusalem was the probable result of this act of adultery unless the nation repented and yet the leaders did not listen. As we know from history the city of Jerusalem was conquered, the Temple destroyed, and the brightest and best of its citizens were taken into captivity. This exile lasted about 70 years during which time other prophets, such as Ezekiel, echoed the same message. Jeremiah's writings are often dismal sounding warnings but in today's reading a clear note of promise is heard. The God of their ancestors was indeed angry about their betrayal but there was also compassion and forgiveness in God's heart. And so, with the rebellious people of Judah still refusing to change their path, Jeremiah proclaimed, ***"31 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. 32It 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,[96] says the LORD. 33But 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. 34No 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.*** (Jeremiah 31:31-34) All was not lost - better days would come. Years would pass without the realization of this promise from God until the entry into the world of the timeless Son of God. The writers of the New Testament (or New Covenant) together proclaim that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise made through Jeremiah. This new age was to begin with the death and resurrection of the Messiah but the people of Jerusalem in Jesus' day did not yet understand these facts. They did, however, look forward to the day when the new covenant would be enacted and so as the news of Jesus spread the excitement that this could be the time of God grew in the minds of some of the people and so the event we are looking at today was a time of intense expectation for the promise of God to come to fulfilment.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem with palm branches waving in the hands of those who proclaimed him as the Messiah of God. The news of the raising of Lazarus might have helped to encourage that understanding but so too did the years of preaching and teaching. The clear announcement did not go

unnoticed by the leaders of the Temple and so there is a note of danger in Jesus' arrival in the worship centre of the nation of Israel. The events leading up to the festival of Passover meant that a large crowd of people were coming into Jerusalem and six days before the celebration of that important feast Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. We are told, in the passage appointed for today, that in the midst of the crowd were some Greeks. More pointedly we are told that 'among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.' It would not surprise me that there were all sorts of people in the crowd but the words 'went up to worship' raises some questions. Were the Greeks going up to worship on this most Jewish of festivals or were they just part of the crowd? We can only guess at why and how they came to be present but we are not left in much doubt that they were interested in the work of Jesus. While on the outside of the circle these Greeks sought a way to meet this important preacher and so they found someone they knew in the band of disciples and asked permission.

They came to Philip, perhaps because they recognized him from 'back home' and said, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. Philip had been hearing Jesus talking about going to Jerusalem to die and so may have been a bit suspicious about allowing these Greeks to get close to Jesus. In any event Andrew was called upon to help and the two of them brought these searchers to Jesus who said, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified'. It seems a strange thing to say to people who you just met unless we understand some of the Biblical background. You see, according to Isaiah, all the nations of the earth were going to come to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Jesus may have seen the arrival of these Greeks as a sign that this was beginning. The beginning was going to happen in a way that no one truly predicted which is why the next sentence was uttered. 'Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.' (v. 24) The example of a grain of wheat was an illustration that everyone understands. In order to multiply the wheat kernel must endure a transformation that begins with the end of its life. Jesus was going to die and be transformed and he invites everyone to follow. The thought of Jesus' death was troublesome for those waiting for Messiah to usher in the kingdom of God because they couldn't understand the connection between the two things. The thought of death troubled even Jesus and yet the larger goal allowed him to face the reality and the need for his death. 'For this reason I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' The purpose of the grain of wheat is to die in order to grow more plants. The purpose of God's Messiah was to die in order to provide atonement for the sin of the world and to 'open the life-gate that all may go in' (To God be the Glory) Jesus had the freedom to choose to follow through on God's plan or to reject it and over and over again we see Jesus choosing to follow God's plan - often at great personal cost. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews points out that 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of

eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek' (Heb. 5:8,9) Through his death and resurrection all of the people on earth, both Jews and Greeks, are invited to follow him into paradise.

The path of the Messiah is also the path for Messiah's disciples which is understandably a troubling and difficult thought. No matter what is happening in the world there is a yearning for things to be better. There is a sense within all of us, it seems, that no matter how good things are they could be better. That sense comes from the promise of God to 'make all things new' and to 'write God's laws on their hearts' which have all come true in Jesus the Messiah. Things have been put right at the cost of Jesus' life and so hope is reborn. The wrinkle in the story is that this new reality has only one narrow path as an access point. There is no road toll but there is a cost to the discipleship and Jesus lays it out for his Greek visitors and anyone else who was listening. "The time had come for Jesus to be glorified" but "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains a single grain". The payment indeed has been made and the promise of new life is real - so many people have testified to this truth how can there be doubt - but the path requires that we allow ourselves to be crucified alongside Jesus the Messiah. The way to find ourselves is to lose ourselves, Jesus says, and so the challenge that was before the people of Judah as they faced the threat brought to them by the Babylonians is the challenge before us. Do we believe God? Do we believe enough to follow in God's footsteps? Are we willing to give up our way of doing things and obey those commandments that will be written on our hearts? These are not easy questions to answer and yet they are the only questions that really matter.

You and I have the opportunity to follow Jesus and thereby find our purpose from God. It will require a death of sorts to lay down our lives for the sake of that ultimate purpose. In order to have our lives bless others we will need to set our own desires aside for the sake of those others. We have suspended our in person Church services for the sake of the safety of others and experience the pain of that choice. "But what shall we say? God save us from this hour?" No, this is our purpose - to be a blessing for those around us - a haven of rest - a source of encouragement - a pointer toward the life that Jesus offers. My prayer is that we will all open our minds and our lives to what God has in store through this pandemic and into the years to come. God will be glorified in what we do if we are following in Jesus' footsteps.

The Greeks asked, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" and they were brought to see him. May we ask to see Jesus as well and allow the Holy Spirit of God to bring us to him. He promised that when two or three are gathered together in his name he would be in the midst of them. It is my personal opinion that such gatherings work over the telephone or the internet every bit as much as they work in person. As we wait for the 'all clear' announcement regarding the virus may God allow us to see His presence in our lives.