

Readings Jeremiah 31.31-34

John 12. 20-33

Sermon Part 1 – All Age

Today is the 5th Sunday in Lent – one more to go – that’s Palm Sunday next week – and then it’s Easter – the day we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead.

But first he has to go through some very real suffering – and it’s hard to understand why? Even Jesus was troubled by what lay ahead – we’ll hear that in today’s reading from John’s gospel.

But he said something that might help – he was speaking to God and he said, “Father bring glory to your name.” And in that moment he knew that by dying on the cross he would bring glory to God.

It looked like the worst thing that could happen but it began a new way of understanding and coming close to God -for all people, young and old.

It’s so tempting to want to jump straight from Christmas to Easter – two times of joy and happiness, but it’s important to remember the day that we call Good Friday, when the one thing Jesus prayed for was that the people who didn’t love him should be forgiven. That’s how much he loves us even when we don’t love him. So whatever we do let’s try to make sure we glorify God by letting his love flow through us to the people we meet.

Part 2

The prophet Jeremiah had a hard life. He was very aware of the ways in which the nation, most of them in exile in Babylon, had broken the sacred covenant given to Moses. He suffered greatly because of his unpopular messages and even today we sometimes hear people with a message of doom and gloom called a “Jeremiah”. But there are messages of hope scattered throughout his book and today’s is perhaps the most hopeful.

Yes, they have broken their promise to God but he has not forgotten them. This is a new chance – a new covenant, a new relationship between God and his people – more personal than that with the whole nation. This covenant which God will initiate will not be based on obedience to a written law but will be a covenant of the heart. It will involve an inward change of life. Each and every person will make their own covenant with their God – a message full of hope and a turning point in the history of the Jewish people.

Jesus, too, has reached a turning point. He has set his face towards Jerusalem and must embark on the agonising road to Calvary. The mood is sombre and even Jesus wrestles as he contemplates the enormity and cost of his calling.

I was discussing these readings with my daughter Jenni, in Toronto. She too was preparing a sermon for today in the church where she has a 3 month placement. She suggested the following illustration which I hope you will find helpful, as I have:

There comes a point in time when everything that you were being prepared for is in place; when there is no turning back. An Olympic skier stands at the top of ski slope waiting for that moment when every part of her being says, "Now!" The diver, who has worked towards this point for weeks and months and years steps onto the board, completely focussed, ready at this moment to make a perfect descent – "Now!" The painter, having spent many hours on her latest painting recognises that now is the moment to put the brush down.

This is where we meet Jesus in today's reading. Until now he has been busy with his Father's work teaching the good news, healing the sick, casting out demons and most recently, raising the dead. But today his hour has come. There is no turning back. It is his "Now" moment.

Jerusalem is buzzing. People have come from all over for the Passover festival.

Some will come every year. For others it's a long journey, maybe a once in a lifetime pilgrimage. Many are faithful Jews, but the Romans are out in force and there are many nationalities coming together to observe or even take part in the celebrations. And this is when some Greeks seek out our Lord. Approaching Philip, they say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Then we have that homely detail where Philip tells Andrew and the two of them go to tell Jesus. This is the turning point – the "NOW" moment for Jesus. He is sought out now, not only by his own people but by other nations. And what does he say?

Bring them over?

Let's see what they want?

Tell them I'm too busy?

No! It is enough for Jesus to know that they are seeking him out; they are interested in what he stands for. This is what he says:

"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 will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

John doesn't record many of Jesus' parables so this little gem must have made a great impression on him. By the time he is writing John has the benefit, as do we, of hindsight. He knows what Jesus is talking about, but at the time it must have been just another of those mysterious sayings that the disciples didn't yet understand. Therefore it had to be simple. It had to be memorable. Perhaps it had to be difficult too. The grain of wheat, like any other seed, dying to produce abundant new life is the simple bit, but then this life is to be hated rather than loved. What can that mean? I wonder if the picture of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, praying in the temple might help?

The Pharisee clearly loved his life, “I thank you that I am not like other men...” Whereas the tax-collector had a very low opinion of himself, beating his breast and unable to look up, possibly hating his life and simply asking for mercy. We know which one was justified in God’s sight. Is that what Jesus means by loving or hating one’s life? Which of them glorified God?

Jesus is asserting that he needs to die. He may not hold on to his life, as his effect on the world while he is alive is minimal. It stretches just as far as he can walk. But from his death will come enough new life for all the world, Greeks included! He knows that life for him and for those who follow only comes on the other side of death.

What does that mean for us? Jesus is not only talking about himself. His followers too need to be ready to lose their lives in order to gain life in all its fullness, life eternal, which begins now!

It’s about getting our priorities right, about living our lives to the full, in God’s service, caring for our neighbours, for our planet, using our various gifts to glorify him and being ready to give it up – again for his glory.

A Prayer: O Lord, you revealed your kingdom in parables that spoke of simple things, yeast in a batch of dough, new life in a grain of wheat, simple things that point us to deep truths. Grant that the simple choices we make – what tea to drink, where to shop, how to spend our time, who and what to pray for may honour your name and reveal your kingdom, present among us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Closing Blessing:

May God, who knows you better than you know yourself, help you on the journey.

May Jesus, who has walked before you, guide your steps.

May the Spirit, who prompts your prayers, nourish you as you travel.

And may the Father, Son and Holy Spirit await your arrival with joy and love.

All for God’s glory. Amen