

SYNOPSIS OF LENT V (B) (March 18) HOMILY JOHN 12:20-33

Introduction: Today's readings focus on the approaching death of Jesus which Paul considers a priestly sacrifice and John considers the moment of Jesus' "exaltation" and "glorification." The readings offer us a challenge. Just as Jesus became the "*Promised Messiah of Glory*" and the "*Conquering Son of Man*" by offering his life for others, we, too, must possess Heaven by dying to self and by spending our lives in self-giving, sacrificial service.

Scripture lessons: The first reading, taken from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, explains how God will replace the Old Covenant of Judgment with a New Covenant of Forgiveness of sins. This New or Renewed Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah was fulfilled, at least in part, through Jesus' life, death and Resurrection. The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 51) is our cry for mercy from God as we ask Him to cleanse us from sin and guilt and create a "new heart" for us. In the second reading, St. Paul tells the Hebrews that it is by Jesus' suffering and death, in obedience to his Father's will, that Jesus established the New Covenant. Using metaphors of the "*sown wheat-grain*" and the "*spent life*" in today's Gospel, Jesus teaches the same lessons St. Paul does. The Gospel hints at the inner struggle of Jesus in accepting the cup of suffering to inaugurate the New and everlasting Covenant. However, Jesus accepts the cross as his "*hour*," meaning the stepping-stone to his passion, death, Resurrection and exaltation. He also considers his "*hour*" as the way of glorifying his Heavenly Father and of being glorified by his Father. In addition, it is the way by which Jesus draws all people into the saving action of God. Finally, the "lifting up" of Jesus on the cross and later into Heavenly glory by Resurrection and Ascension is the assurance of our own exaltation and glorification, provided we accept our crosses.

Life messages: 1) Today's Gospel teaches us that new life and eternal life are possible only by the death of the self through suffering and service. Salt gives its taste by dissolving in water. A candle gives light by burning its wick and melting its wax. The oyster produces a priceless pearl by transforming a grain of sand through a long and painful process. Loving parents sacrifice themselves so that their children can enjoy a better life than they themselves had. Let us pray that we may acquire this self-sacrificial spirit, especially during Lent. 2) Only a life spent for others will be glorified in Heaven, and sometimes even in this world. We know that the world owes everything to people who have spent their time and talents for God and for their fellow human beings. Mother Teresa, for instance, gave up her comfortable teaching career, and with just 17 cents in her pocket began her challenging life for the "poorest of the poor" in the crowded streets of

Calcutta. We see similar cases in the history of great saints, scientists and benefactors of mankind in all walks of life. They chose to burn out rather than to rust out. Examples are the Rockefeller Foundation for scientific progress and the Bill Gates Foundation for AIDS Research. Let us, too, spend ourselves for others.

LENT V (March 18)): Jer 31:31-34; Heb 5:7-9; Jn 12:20-33

Anecdotes: # 1: Sacrifices of Olympic champions: When we watch the Olympics, what do we see but young athletes who have made enormous sacrifices over the years? They have sacrificed a normal childhood for countless hours of hard work and pain and solitary training, and they have done it all just for that moment when they might stand on the winner's platform at the Olympic Games. If few of us are Olympians, many of us are parents, and what is parenthood but a whole slew of sacrifices? You sacrifice all of your privacy and a piece of your sanity. You sacrifice a neat, orderly environment in which to live, where things stay just where you left them. You make a huge financial sacrifice - between children and taxes, you're lucky to have a dollar in your pocket at the end of the day - but you do it all for the sake of something which money can't buy. In these and in many other ways, we are perfectly used to the idea of losing one thing in order to gain something else. It all makes me wonder: if we are so willing to sacrifice and even suffer for things which matter to us in our worldly lives, why shouldn't we do even more for the sake of our spiritual lives? Why should we shy away from the full meaning of what Jesus said in today's Gospel: *"If you love your life you will lose it, but if you hate your life in this world, you will gain it for eternal life."*

2: Dying for Another: The story of Maximilian Kolbe is well-known. He was a Franciscan priest in Poland, and he was in a concentration camp during the Second World War. Some prisoners had escaped, and the authorities were determined that this should not happen again. For every prisoner that escaped they picked a prisoner in the group, and that prisoner was condemned to die. After one young man was picked, someone who had a wife and young family back home, Maximilian stepped forward and offered to take his place. The soldiers were shocked at this, but they took him up on his offer, and the young man returned to the group. Maximilian died in a horrible fashion, as they were all locked in cages and left there to starve to death. All during that time he encouraged others and inspired them with his prayers. He was canonized some years ago and the prisoner whose place Maximilian took, wept through the entire ceremony. I like to think that he understood what real love is, and that death would no longer have any fear for him. (*Jack McArdle in And That's the Gospel Truth; quoted by Fr. Botelho*).

3: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound!” One man who learned what there is to lose and gain was an eighteenth-century slave-trader named John Newton. Captain of a trans-Atlantic slaving ship, he had everything this world can offer as he made a lucrative living from the brutal business of buying and selling human cargo. Eventually, he was confronted with Jesus Christ, and he was converted to the Gospel truth which makes us free (John 8:32). He spent the rest of his life crusading to abolish the very business which had proven so enriching. He also wrote a number of great hymns, including a familiar one which begins: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, Was blind, but now I see.” Once, John Newton thought that he was on top of the world, but in truth, he was wretched and blind. He lacked the moral clarity to see that he was nothing more than a cynical businessman making money in an evil enterprise; he was allowing the agnostic's law of supply and demand to separate him from his Christian conscience. Then Jesus came along and the old John Newton died. A new John Newton was born. An old life was lost and a new one was found, a new life whose melodic fruit remains with us to this day. What about yourself? What have you got to lose? You've got to die to yourself in order to live with Christ! You've got to sacrifice and give up to gain! So what about it? What have you got to lose? What about selfishness? Shouldn't we lose that narrow-minded little love which only extends to family and friends? (21 additional anecdotes are uploaded in our website: <http://stjohngrandbay.org/> under “Sunday homilies.”)

Introduction: Lent's Fifth Sunday's readings present us with a challenge: Just as Jesus became the “Promised Messiah of Glory” and the “Conquering Son of Man” by offering his life for others, we, too, must possess Heaven by dying to self and spending our lives in self-giving, sacrificial service. Today's readings focus on the upcoming death of Jesus, which is interpreted not only as a priestly sacrifice (Heb 5) but also as the moment of his "exaltation" and "glorification" (Jn 12). The first reading, taken from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, explains how God will replace the Old Covenant of Judgment with a New Covenant of Forgiveness of sins. This New or Renewed Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah has been fulfilled, at least in part, through Jesus' life, death and Resurrection. The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 51) is our cry for mercy from God as we ask Him to cleanse us from sin and guilt and create a “new heart” for us. In the second reading, St. Paul tells the Hebrews that it is by His suffering and death, in obedience to His Father's will, that Jesus established the New Covenant. Quoting the full text of Jeremiah 31:31-34, St Paul explains that the new and better covenant was inaugurated through the High Priest Jesus' offering of himself as the one perfect sacrifice for sins. We cannot appreciate adequately the “*Blood of the*

New and everlasting Covenant” which we share in the Eucharist without recognizing the joys and sufferings, triumphs and setbacks that marked the history of God’s Covenant relationship with His people. Using metaphors of the “*sown wheat-grain*” and the “*spent life*” in today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches the same lesson. The Gospel hints at Jesus’ inner struggle in accepting the cup of suffering to inaugurate the New and everlasting Covenant. However, Jesus accepts the cross as his “*hour*,” meaning the stepping-stone to his passion, death, Resurrection and exaltation. He further considers his “*hour*” as the way of glorifying his Heavenly Father and of being glorified by his Father. It is also the way by which he draws all people into the saving action of God. Finally, the “lifting up” of Jesus is the assurance of our own exaltation and glorification, provided we accept our crosses.

First reading, Jeremiah 31:31-34 explained: Jeremiah lived from about 650 B.C. to perhaps 580 B.C. Most of his work was in Judah's capital, Jerusalem. Called by God as a young man, Jeremiah lived through the tragic years preceding and succeeding the ruin of the kingdom of Judah. In 597 Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and deported part of its population to Babylon (Iraq). A second Judean revolt brought back the Chaldean armies once again, and in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was captured, its Temple burnt and more of its inhabitants deported. When Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah remained in Palestine with his friend Gedaliah whom the Chaldeans had appointed governor. When Gedaliah was assassinated, a party of Jews, fearing reprisals, fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them. It is probable that he died there.

Jeremiah lived through these catastrophic events as God’s messenger, preaching, prophesying disaster and vainly admonishing the incompetent Davidic kings. He tried to keep the people, the priests and the kings faithful to God amidst an atmosphere of political intrigue. He was blunt in his words, and, though some passages in today's reading seem gentle, in his confrontations with erring people, priests and kings, Jeremiah was always firm and strong. He asked questions and supplied answers: Why was there a need for God to make a New Covenant? It was because the people, priests and kings had broken the original one. How would the New Covenant be different from the old? It would be written on the hearts of the people and hence could not be erased by cowardly leaders. Why would there be no need for teachers under the New Covenant? Because the present teachers -- the priests and kings -- had failed miserably, and God chose to take other measures. The passage reads as follows: “*I will place My Law within them and write it upon their hearts.*” This New Covenant does not abolish the earlier Covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses, for these earlier covenants are really the progressive stages of the history of the one Great Covenant

between the one God and His people. Jeremiah's prophecy of a New or Renewed Covenant has been fulfilled, at least in part, through Jesus' life, death and Resurrection.

Second Reading, Hebrews 5:7-9 explained: This passage from Paul's letter to the Hebrews is chosen because it fits with today's Gospel which contains an ominous prediction of Jesus' passion, and some details of Jesus' prayer to his Father. The verses preceding these describe the priests of ancient Judaism, and then describe Jesus as the Priest of the New Covenant. Today's verses expand on that theme of Jesus as God's Son and at the same time emphasize his human nature (*learning obedience through suffering, thus made perfect*). They also indicate Jesus' superiority to the priests of his day in that he "*became the source of eternal Salvation*" to others. Since Jesus suffered and prayed with tears to be saved from death, he can sympathize with our sufferings. Since Jesus knows our human condition and is touched by our anguish and distress, he pleads with God the Father on our behalf.

Gospel exegesis The Context: Some Greek pilgrims who were either new converts to Judaism or mere 'truth-seekers' were greatly impressed by the royal reception given to Jesus on Palm Sunday and by the subsequent cleansing of the Temple by Jesus. Hence, they approached the apostle Philip who had a Greek name and requested a private interview with the Master. Jesus uses the occasion to declare that he is the "*Son of Man*" prophesied by Daniel, and that his *time of glorification* is at hand. He immediately corrects the false notion of a political messiah by stating that he will be glorified by his suffering, death and Resurrection.

The hour of glorification for the "Son of Man": The "hour" Jesus refers to is his time for glorifying his Heavenly Father and of being glorified by his Father. It is also the way by which he draws all people into the saving action of God. Jesus' being "lifted up" on the cross to glorify his Father reminds us that we too can glorify God by wholeheartedly accepting our crosses from our loving Heavenly Father.

The term "Son of Man" (translated as "a son of man" by the RSV), is taken from Daniel 7:13. The seventh chapter begins with the description of a frightening vision of Daniel in which he sees the cruel and savage world powers of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians as wild beasts like a winged lion, a bear with three tusks, a four-headed leopard and a terrible, ten-horned wild beast. At last, Daniel sees a gentle, humane and gracious ruler in the form of a man. The Jews, under repeated foreign rules and bondages, dreamed of

such a God-sent ruler and preferred to call this “promised Messiah” by the name “*Son of Man*.” In the apocryphal Book of Enoch, this Jewish dream of a world conqueror is clearly stated. It was but natural that the apostles shared this view and consequently saw the “Son of Man” in Jesus. Jesus promptly corrected them, however, replacing their dream of conquest and political power with a vision of His cross and suffering.

The metaphors of the “dying grain of wheat” and of the “surrendered life”: Jesus explains to his apostles that it is by his suffering and death that he is bringing life and liberation to the sinful world, just as a grain of wheat sown in the field ceases to remain itself alone, “just a seed,” by germinating and then growing into a plant which produces many new grains of wheat. In the same way, it is by the self-sacrificial lives of holy men and women that life and salvation come to mankind. In other words, when we “die” to our selfishness, we “rise” to new life in Jesus Christ. To be “buried in the earth” means avoiding sin, accepting suffering and living for others.

Life messages: 1) **New life and eternal life are made attainable for us only by the death of the self through suffering and service.** Salt delivers its taste by dissolving in water; a candle gives light by burning its wick and melting its wax. The oyster produces a priceless pearl by a long and painful process. Loving parents sacrifice themselves so that their children can enjoy a better life than they themselves have had. Let us pray for this self-sacrificial spirit, especially during Lent.

2) **Only a life spent for others will be glorified here in this world and in Heaven.** We know that the world owes everything to people who have spent their time and talents for God and for their fellow human beings. Mother Teresa, for instance, gave up her comfortable teaching career and, with just 17 cents in her pocket, began her challenging life for the “poorest of the poor” in the crowded streets of Calcutta. Thus, she became, in the words of the Secretary General of the U.N., “the most powerful woman in the world.” We see similar cases in the history of great saints, scientists and benefactors of mankind in all walks of life.

3) **It is better to burn out than rust out.** This is one of the repeated pieces of advice Jesus gave us (Mark 8:35; Matthew 16:25; 10:39; Luke 9:24; 17:33). Bernard Shaw in his play, *Joan of Arc*, shows the saint as praying: “Lord I shall last a year; use me as you can.” Many charitable foundations and research institutions are financed by generous millionaires who understood this great principle of life (e.g. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill Gates Foundation for AIDS Research), while so many others selfishly keep their God-given wealth

and talents for themselves. Let us learn to live this Lenten period “burning out,” spending our time and talents for others around us by humble, selfless and self-giving service. “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can” (John Wesley).