

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 29, 2009

Lent 5B 2009

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today's Gospel lesson from John is an important one. It marks the close of Jesus' public ministry in John's Gospel and represents his last teaching to the crowds. This passage also serves as a bridge from our observance of Lent to our entering Passion Week next Sunday. Here, Jesus realizes that his ministry and his claim to be the Messiah have been rejected by the High Priest and leaders of the Temple. When three Greeks who came to Jerusalem for Passover ask to speak with Jesus, Jesus declares that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Jesus during his ministry spent time in Gentile districts and healed many Gentiles. The arrival of these Greek believers was a sign that God was going to do something new and enter a new covenant with humanity.

Jesus begins telling the significance of his death by offering a proverb about a grain of wheat – unless it falls into the earth and dies, it is just that: a single grain. But if it falls into the earth and dies, it bears much fruit. He speaks of new and more abundant life arising from the plant that grows from the dead seed.

In John, there is none of the human angst of the other Gospels. There is no “let this cup pass from me.” Jesus here is firmly in control and willingly surrenders to his fate. He is in perfect unity with the Father when he asks that the Father's name be glorified. A voice comes from heaven, just as at his baptism by John and the

Transfiguration, declaring, “I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.” Jesus then asserts that when he is lifted up from the earth he will draw all people to himself.

Well, let me tell you, John is hard to understand. His language is very coded and his gospel is packed with theology. I often find John to be as dense as kryptonite! Our Bishop has said frankly that he would rather preach on any other lesson before preaching on John! So what is going on here in this final public appearance of Jesus?

John is doing major Bible talk here. His was a largely Jewish group of Jesus followers in the late first or early second century living in a post-Temple and increasingly Gentile world. However, they knew their people’s history and they knew the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew that their God was a God of justice and righteousness. They knew that God opposes oppression and liberates the captives. They knew that their God is faithful in covenant with them and responds to human need. That is the Old Testament in a nutshell.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God’s glory is seen when God acts to save God’s people. God’s glory was seen when God led the people out of bondage in Egypt. God’s glory was seen when he led the remnant out of Babylon to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Here when describing his impending crucifixion, Jesus asks the crowds to be prepared to see beyond it to the new and more abundant life that will come from it. His death will be source of life for all who follow him – Jews and now these Greek believers. Here, John is asking us, his readers, to listen up and witness this.

In our reading from Jeremiah, the Lord is promising a new covenant with the people God will deliver from bondage in Babylon. The captives had been in Babylon for more than a generation; they saw and learned new things. The people and their society had changed as a result. Consequently, God’s relationship with God’s people

will change. No longer will the covenant be imposed from outside and carved on their flesh. Instead, it will arise from within and be written on their hearts. God promises an individual relationship with each person. No longer will they say to one another, “Know the Lord” because each one will know the Lord in his or her own heart. Everyone is capable of being in right relationship with the Creator.

So what are we to make of these lessons today? Jeremiah shows God responding to a changing people. Society and perhaps even the sense of personal identity had changed since the primordial days of Noah, the iron age days of Abraham and even the days of Moses. New knowledge and new experiences change us. Look at our own lives. Are we the same person with the same ideas and attitudes we were 20 or 50 years ago? What about our parents or grandparents who were born in the early twentieth century before electricity and the automobile but now live in the 21st century? As Jeremiah saw it, God saw the different world and the change in God’s people and responded by changing the Covenant into a deeply personal and individual one. I would suggest that God is always responsive and is just as responsive to us as God was to Jeremiah’s people. Jesus knew he was living in a different and changing world when Greek “God fearers” – gentiles who wanted to learn of the Hebrew God – came to him.

Jesus then teaches a great lesson about death and about living in his parable about the grain of wheat. He tells us the true nature of God’s ongoing creative work – dying-and-arising is a fact of life in the universe, a reflection of the way all things are and how all things become. First century Palestinian farmers could know this truth from a grain of wheat just as surely as twenty-first century astrophysicists see it at the edges of the universe through their telescopes on Mauna Kea. Here Jesus, true God and true man, places himself as a Covenant sign in the middle of this creative truth.

Jesus joined this parable with another saying – “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” It is a way of telling us another truth of creation – if we don’t grow, we die; and if we don’t let parts of us die so that we can grow, then the organism dies. That is true for us individually. Our cells have to die so they can be replenished and we can grow as we age. We have sometimes to let our emotions and relationships change and develop in order for us to grow. The same is true for societies and cultures. I might add that it is also true for churches and religions.

However, people resent change. The powerful want to maintain the status quo in order to maintain their positions of privilege. The less advantaged resent change and cling to whatever they have in fear that change will take away what little they have and rely on. Today we live in a violent world. That often accompanies change. We are experiencing a lot of that “Give me that Old Time religion” rhetoric and a surge of religious fundamentalism in all the world’s faiths and that, too, often accompanies change. We see many resisting change and fostering fear and intolerance in our society.

Here Jesus calls us to follow him seeing through his cross and the crosses in our lives to the glory of the Resurrection. No we are not Jesus who is so totally in tune with the Father. But Jesus beckons us to follow him into experiences of transition and transformation by living in faith with him promising “where I am there will my servant be also.” It is a promise we are called to ponder during Holy Week.

Amen