

## The Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2018

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish



### Today's Scriptures

The prophet Jeremiah warned the rulers and people of Judah that their failure to live in obedience to God's Law would lead to ruin. Later, after years of captivity, Jeremiah offered God's continually-faithless people a word of hope. He spoke of God's intention to establish a new covenant with them. Because of their disobedience, the people never found salvation in God's Law and remained estranged from him. In this new covenant, God would be the one to act. No longer would their relationship with God depend on their adherence to an external Law. God would write his law upon their hearts. He would forgive people of their sin; they could know him as their God. Under the New Covenant, the people could draw near to their forgiving God and be transformed interiorly through their relationship with him.

In today's reading from Hebrews, a suffering Jesus cried out to God in prayer. Yet even in the distress caused by his impending death, Jesus remained obedient to the Father's will. Throughout his human life, Jesus grew in his trust of the Father, and this trust motivated Jesus to be obedient to God in everything—in living out his mission, when challenged by misunderstanding, threats, and betrayal, even in the face of death. Unlike the Israelites, Jesus drew closer to God in suffering and his obedience to his Father grew out of his deep relationship with him. Through his trust and obedience, the human Jesus was transformed ("made perfect") in the sense that his will became perfectly aligned with the Father's will.

Jesus' trust in, and obedience to his Father's will, is on full display in today's Gospel. When some Greek gentiles sought out Jesus during the Passover gathering in Jerusalem, Jesus recognized that his "hour" was upon him. Very soon, he must lay down his life in order to fulfil his Father's plan of salvation. In his humanity, Jesus admitted he was troubled by the thought of his death but he trusted his Father and did not ask that he be saved. Instead, Jesus instructed his disciples that death-- something so feared— can be the means through which much good is produced. Jesus trusted his Father that when he was lifted up in death, the Father would transform his suffering. He trusted that the Father would be glorified, Satan would be defeated, and all men and women would have access to the Father through himself.

Through his obedience, Jesus became the means through which God would establish the new covenant promised by Jeremiah. Jesus obeyed his Father, not out of fear, but out of love and trust. By knowing, loving, trusting, and obeying the Father, Jesus was "made perfect" until his will, and the Father's, were the same. In life, and in death, Jesus trusted that the Father would transform his sacrifice into the means of salvation for all who believed in him. He became the New Covenant through which all persons could draw close to God, experience forgiveness, and find eternal life.

### Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

#### Reading I: Jeremiah 31:31-34

**I will make a new covenant with Israel.**

- The prophecy of Jeremiah in today's first reading was spoken to the people of Israel while they were in exile.
- The people had not remained faithful to the covenant made at Sinai.
- The old covenant was written stone; the new covenant will be written in the people's hearts.

**Responsorial Psalm: 51:3-4; 12-13; 14-15**  
**Create in me a clean heart, O God.**

#### Reading II: Hebrews 5:7-9

**Jesus learned to obey God.**

- The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews describes the prayer of Jesus during his passion.
- It is his reverence that makes Jesus perfect and the source of salvation for all who obey him.
- Salvation comes through obedience bought with suffering.

#### Gospel: John 22:20-33

**If it dies, it produces much grain.**

- The author of today's Gospel is writing for a Greek audience.
- Jesus' response to some Greeks asking to see Jesus becomes a prediction of his death and glorification.
- In the image of the grain of wheat that dies to produce life we see that God will be glorified in the death of Jesus. Jesus will be exalted, drawing all persons to himself and thus to eternal life

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**Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccáta mundi, miserére nobis.**  
**Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccáta mundi, miserére nobis.**  
**Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccáta mundi, dona nobis pacem.**

# Lifted Up into Life

What do you think about death? About your death? It is a subject that we often try to avoid — a reaction that only strengthens its ability to disturb us. Have you noticed that while lots of TV shows depict death — be it in gun battles, car crashes, murder, mayhem, war or “justifiable homicide,” entertainment rarely depicts a funeral? Death is the occasion for meting out justice, for detective skills and autopsies, but not for focusing on the deceased’s respectful burial or the grief of the bereaved.

Only our newscasts seem to pay attention to the gaping hole left in the universe when someone dies — even then, it is almost always because of their murder, suicide or fame. Even more rarely, do we get a glimpse of what someone thinks about their proximate death. Sometimes, patients in hospice will share their feelings. More often, people gather round them to express their love and support and to let them know that while they will be missed, they can move on. Death forces us to confront the deepest truths of our lives: what we have lived for and what we think it means.

On November 27, 2013, Pope Francis reflected on death during his general audience in Rome. He said, “Death affects us all, and it questions us in a profound way. ... If it is understood as the end of everything, death ... terrifies us, it becomes a threat that shatters every dream, every promise, it severs every relationship.” He suggested that if we “consider our lives as a span of time between two poles: birth and death,” such a vision of death is both reasonable and terrible. This vision, said Francis, is the logical conclusion of the atheism that “interprets life as a random existence in the world ... a journey toward nothingness,” or the “practical atheism which consists in living for one’s own interests alone.” He added that “When we think of death as the end of everything,” we “have no choice but to hide it, deny it or trivialize it so that it doesn’t scare us.”

What sadder commentary could there be on someone’s life than to trivialize their death?

Today’s Gospel presents Jesus in the moment when he realized that “his hour” had come. Here, John gives us a glimpse of Jesus’ heart as he makes the astounding statement, “I am troubled now.” The word Jesus used for being troubled was the one that described him when he shared Martha’s grief at Lazarus’ death, the same word that depicted the churning of the waters of the pool of Siloam. Jesus was deeply shaken and emotional.

Having admitted that, his next words reiterated the core orientation of his life. He was facing his end, what would both look and feel like utter defeat, and his first thought was of his Father: Should he ask his Father for an escape? Reframing everything that was about to take place, he prayed, “Father, glorify your name.” After expressing the depth of his human frailty, Jesus took on the role of explaining the things of God. “When I am lifted up ... I will draw everyone to myself.”

John tells us that his phrase “when I am lifted up,” indicated how he would die. Like so much John wrote, this has two levels of meaning. Jesus was speaking literally about being raised on the cross. But, as John tells the passion story, Jesus approached the cross as his exaltation, the revelation of the glory of God in him. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ death on the cross is the revelation par excellence of God’s unfailing love. The cross raised Jesus up as the icon of God’s everlasting love.

In October 2017, Francis again spoke about death and said, “We are all small and helpless before the mystery of death.” We can be encouraged by the fact that even Jesus quailed when he realized his hour had come. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, our high priest knows our weakness and he too prayed with supplication, cries and tears. Nevertheless, he led the way for us in saying, “For this purpose I came to this hour.”

When Jesus chose to walk into what he knew was his final hour, he did so fully aware of the cost and his purpose: “Now is the time of judgment ... now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” Only by going through his death would Jesus demonstrate that God’s love overcomes every evil. That was the purpose of his life and his glory.

Now and again, we all need to confront the fact that we will die; knowing that leads us to evaluate our purpose and the worth of each day. Blessed are we when we believe what Francis said of the moment of our death: “There hope will end and it will be a reality, the reality of life.”