

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B

Prayer of the Day

O God, with steadfast love you draw us to yourself, and in mercy you receive our prayers. Strengthen us to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, that through life and death we may live in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

The Judeans in Babylon blamed their exile on their ancestors, who had broken the covenant established at Sinai. Here the prophet looks to a day when God will make a new covenant with the people. There will be no need to teach the law, because God will write it on their hearts.

³¹The 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, 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.

Psalm: Psalm 51:1-12

Create in me a clean heart, O God. (Ps. 51:10)

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your | steadfast love;
in your great compassion blot out | my offenses.

²**Wash me through and through | from my wickedness,
and cleanse me | from my sin.**

³For I know | my offenses,
and my sin is ev- | er before me.

⁴**Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil | in your sight;
so you are justified when you speak and right | in your judgment. R**

⁵Indeed, I was born | steeped in wickedness,
a sinner from my | mother’s womb.

⁶**Indeed, you delight in truth | deep within me,
and would have me know wisdom | deep within.**

⁷Remove my sins with hyssop, and I | shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be pur- | er than snow.

⁸**Let me hear | joy and gladness;
that the body you have broken | may rejoice. R**

⁹Hide your face | from my sins,
and blot out | all my wickedness.

¹⁰**Create in me a clean | heart, O God,
and renew a right spir- | it within me.**

¹¹Cast me not away | from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spir- | it from me.

¹²**Restore to me the joy of | your salvation
and sustain me with your boun- | tiful Spirit. R**

Second Reading: Hebrews 5:5-10

Using priestly imagery and references to the Old Testament, the author explains how Christ lived in trusting obedience to God, and so God has made Christ the source of our eternal salvation.

⁵Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

⁶as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Gospel: John 12:20-33

Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time to celebrate the Passover festival. Here Jesus' words about seeds planted in the ground turn the disaster of his death into the promise of a harvest in which everyone will be gathered.

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Sermon

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Spring is just around the corner. Lent is drawing to a close as we journey closer and closer to Jerusalem and Holy Week. If you are like me, this Lenten season has gone by quickly as we are seeing even more light at the end of the tunnel we know as COVID 19. Yet, we must remain vigilant. We look forward to the future even as we practice measures to help ensure that we remain as safe as possible.

Within our gospel text today we find a portion that is often used at the time of burial. Jesus reminds us that when a seed dies, it bears much fruit. Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Servants will be honored. Glory comes through crucifixion.

And while we may whole heartedly agree with what Jesus is saying and teaching us, we also know that that is not the way of the world. No indeed, the world says that glory comes by way of clear victory over others, so win at all costs. Loss is simply the end. Death has the last word. Might makes right. Don't worry about losers. They are of no account.

And many in our world would have us all believe that there are indeed many, many losers in our culture and society today. And just so, they are of no account. None whatsoever. We shouldn't spend too much time and energy on them. We are the victors. We are the winners. And that's all that matters. Period.

But you and I know that none of this is true for God and for the days that are surely coming and indeed are here among us now. Now is the judgment of our world. And this is the judgement: God so loved the world – the cosmos – the big world with all the nations and people. God so loved the world.

And this love attracts the whole creation and all peoples. When they attend worship, we can be confident that God drew them there. Like the Greeks in our gospel reading, by their presence and their words they say “Please show us Jesus.”

Whenever a newcomer or stranger shows up in worship, you and I can be sure that Jesus rejoices and proclaims the glory of the cross and resurrection – Now is the judgment of the world – now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of God and of Christ, the Messiah. The Son of Man is the anointed one and the king whose glory is revealed on the cross, which of course seemingly is a place for losers. God loves sinners – losers – like you and me. Jesus Christ is glorified in dying as a loser in the place of losers, He is our king and his reign is forever, like Melchizedek the high priestly king. Jesus is the One who draws all people to himself by God's love and not the ways of our world.

The obedience of Jesus, this high priestly king, is that he is for us and for the world God loves. The guiding principles that he keeps and guards are the law of love – for us. Made pure and holy by his love, you and I know who God is. And further, we cannot help but proclaim the glory God keeps revealing to us – Christ the crucified victor, our champion and our only king, destroys the power of sin and death and raises up all of us to a new life.

One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 51, which is our Psalm for today. As I read through it earlier, I was particularly drawn to verse 10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

As I worked through our other texts for today, I was struck by this one verse and found that if we had a clean heart and a new and right spirit, we could dare to speak to those conditions in our society and culture today that seem to be totally against all that God stands for in this world.

When we accept that the world proclaims that glory indeed comes by way of clear victory over others, so we strive to win at all times, we truly do understand that our world classifies a great many people in a great many circumstances as losers. Period. Those who are of no account. And unfortunately, our world really does mean they are of absolutely no account.

Over the last number of years, we all have lived through these times to be able to identify who these losers are. And by and large they are anyone and everyone who does not fit our self-created mold as to what constitutes a person who is a winner, a victor.

Some of this attitude and belief has been instilled in us for generation upon generation. Added to all that is all that we've picked up in our own lifetime of worldly experience.

I remember many years ago it was commonplace for talk to center around those who are the "haves v. the have nots". The "have nots" were, in this case, lumped together and everyone knew generally who they might be in their own community and personal universe.

But more and more today those who were known as the “have nots”, are being further delineated. We find sexism, racism, and so much more – so very much more. We find inequities of all sorts, varying from nation to nation, with much commonality.

How did we in this country, how did we – citizens of the world – come to this moment in time with this kind of attitude that is running rampant? And maybe even more important – how do we reverse the trend and begin seeing all people as God sees them – his creation - his children who he loves equally, with absolutely no distinction?

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

How much different our world would be if that were our constant prayer? How much different would our community and neighborhood be if we had a clean heart and a new and right spirit?

It would be easy for us to lament alone, or with others about the sad state of our world, focusing on all that separates it into groups that are irrelevant to God.

Psalms 51, verses 11 and 12 say: “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

As you and I journey toward Jerusalem, arriving next Sunday, and coming to understand that once Jesus rides triumphantly into the holy city, he quickly becomes not just a loser, but the chief loser. He is tried as a loser and treated as one as he is crucified on a cross meant for losers.

Yet you and I know that is not the end of the story. The so-called loser is indeed the victor. Death cannot hold what God wants alive and active and bringing salvation to those who have ears to hear.

And just so, you and I are not losers. In fact, in God’s eyes there are no losers. Not one.

With a clean heart, a new, right and willing spirit you and I can help correct the situation in which we find the world. The Good News of Christ is indeed the Good News in every generation to all people. No exceptions.

Fortunately for us, we do not have to die to bear much fruit. With the ever-present Spirit of God within us, we are empowered to bear much life-changing fruit right here. Right now.

May we use today and this week to contemplate what life-changing fruit we might bear in our small corner of God’s world – given to and for us out of God’s abundant love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

You wash us through and through and remember our sin no more. Make your church a community of forgiveness throughout the world. Give your people courage to forgive; through them show the world new possibilities. Bless ministries of repentance and reconciliation. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You fill the earth—from tiny grains of wheat to the mighty thunder—with your presence, and you call us to attend to your will for all creation. Grant weather that prepares the soil for seeds; protect all from violent storms, flooding, and wildfires (*especially*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You promise to write your law on our hearts. Guide citizens throughout the world to shape communities that reflect your mercy, justice, and peace, and give them creativity to work for the welfare of all. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You sustain us with your bountiful Spirit. Restore the joy of all who need to know your presence: those who are lonely or feel unforgivable, those who need healing of mind or body, those who are dying, and all who grieve. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Jesus calls us to follow him in life and death. Empower this congregation in discipleship. Equip children and teachers in Sunday school, confirmation, and learning ministries. Give us your truth and wisdom and teach us to follow Jesus. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

In the cross of Christ, your name is glorified. We praise you for those who have given us words to worship you (*especially Thomas Cranmer*). With all those who have died in Christ, bring us into life everlasting. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.