

5 Lent Year B Readings and Commentary

Introduction by Dale J. Sieverding: Learning something 'by heart' requires more than just *rote* memorization, although that is a part of it, too. For to learn something 'by heart' means more than just inputting data into your system...it lives in you and finds life inside you. Musicians often learn music 'by heart' and will be especially accustomed to the process. Musicians memorize the notes on the page, teaching their muscles to remember the moves, visualizing the music and listening to it. So it is, with the ways and knowledge of the Lord.

"I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord." All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord.

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First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah

The days are coming, says the Lord,

when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers
the day I took them by the hand

to lead them forth from the land of Egypt;
for they broke my covenant,

and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make

with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD.

I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts;

I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives
how to know the LORD.

All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD,

for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

The word of the Lord.

Commentary Jeremiah 31:31-34 by Tom Conry: Jeremiah, writing after the destruction of his society – what Rabbi Abraham Heschel called the "Age of Wrath" – proclaimed a new covenant. To understand the sweeping impact of this assertion, it is necessary to recall that covenants (or treaties) between great kings and vassal peoples had been a well-known literary genre for centuries. The

ordinary punishment for breaking one of these covenants was the destruction and scattering of the people. This is precisely what had happened to Jerusalem in 586 BCE when the temple was destroyed and the elite, including all those connected with the temple, were carted off to Babylon.

The social context of Jeremiah's proclamation then was one of calamity and panic. In the midst of this, Jeremiah begins an entirely new theological idea, one based on a radical egalitarian experience of God. All shall know YHWH, says the prophet, from the least of them to the greatest.

There was no prophet more adamant about facing the bad news or speaking an unpleasant truth to corrupt power than Jeremiah. Still, when all seemed to be irretrievably lost, it was Jeremiah who put into words the hope for a hitherto unimagined future. It was a moment of comforting the afflicted, after decades of afflicting the comfortable.

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Responsorial Psalm Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15

✠(12a) Create a clean heart in me, O God.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners shall return to you.

Commentary Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 14-15 by Tom Conry: The psalmist asserts a radical dependence on God, declaring that God alone holds the power to save. This kind of stance has more far-reaching implications than is commonly realized, for by legitimating God's power, the psalmist implicitly de-legitimizes all others. This is stated clearly in verse 4 ("against you alone have I sinned") and underlined in verse 16 (once again, one has to notice not only which verses are included in the lectionary selection, but also those that are deleted): "you have

no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased." Verses 18 and 19 are later additions, probably attached as a way of softening the impact of the anti-temple bias of verse 16.

Psalm 51 has an unhappy history of interpretation. Already by the time of 1 Clement (between 80 and 140 CE) the understanding of Psalm 51 has been reduced to moralizing – what theologian Ralph Keifer called the "lo, I am a wretch" school of theology. Such extreme interiorization to the exclusion of the social is a misreading of Israeli wisdom literature, to say the least. Verse 5 has been read as a proof-text for the doctrine of original sin, and verses 13-14 have too often been seized upon as pointing toward Jesus.

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Second Reading Hebrews 5:7-9

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews

In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh,
he offered 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 reverence.
Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered;
and when he was made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

The word of the Lord.

Commentary Hebrews 5:7-9 by Tom Conry: Believe it or not, this entire reading is a single fragment of a sentence! The Epistle to the Hebrews boasts the most elaborate sentence construction in the New Testament. This gives evidence for the kind of audience that the author expects to hear this letter: an audience that would appreciate the educated flourishes and convoluted (for us) rhetoric that is characteristic of high style in the first and second centuries.

The curious element here is the assertion that Jesus' loud cries and supplications to be saved from death, nowhere recorded in any known passion narrative, were "heard." It may be derived from Psalm 22 (this is how Justin Martyr explains it) or it may simply give evidence of a reluctance in this community to speak about Jesus' crucifixion.

More to the point is the author's explanation of how Jesus learned obedience; not, as we would expect, from his position as God's son – the way that all males

were supposed to learn the nuances of authority and obedience was from their position in the family – but rather from his suffering. The implied lesson is that suffering is the way that the community will learn obedience as well.

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Gospel Acclamation John 12:26

Whoever serves me must follow me, says the Lord;
and where I am, there also will my servant be.

Gospel John 12:20-33

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast
came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee,
and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

Philip went and told Andrew;

then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them,

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Amen, amen, I say to you,

unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies,

it remains just a grain of wheat;

but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

Whoever loves his life loses it,

and whoever hates his life in this world

will preserve it for eternal life.

Whoever serves me must follow me,

and where I am, there also will my servant be.

The Father will honor whoever serves me.

"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?

'Father, save me from this hour'?

But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.

Father, glorify your name."

Then a voice came from heaven,

"I have glorified it and will glorify it again."

The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder;

but others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

Jesus answered and said,

"This voice did not come for my sake but for yours.

Now is the time of judgment on this world;

now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

And when I am lifted up from the earth,

I will draw everyone to myself."
He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.
The Gospel of the Lord.

Lectionary for Mass in the Dioceses of the United States of America, volume I Copyright © 1970, 1997, 1998 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Commentary John 12:20-33 By John Paul Heil: Main Theme: Glorification to ETERNAL LIFE is through the DEATH of Jesus on the cross. Once "some Greeks," representative of the gentile world, ask to "see" Jesus, Jesus announces that "the hour" has come for him as "the Son of Man" to be "seen" in his glorification, that is, to be manifested to the world as paradoxically "glorified" by the abundant, eternal life that will result from his "hour" of suffering and death on the cross. By being "lifted up from the earth" in crucifixion and dying, Jesus will not remain alone like a single grain of wheat that "remains just a grain of wheat" unless it dies, but he will "produce much fruit" by "drawing everyone to myself." Jesus will thus draw everyone, represented by the Greeks who want to "see" him and the Jewish apostles, Philip and Andrew, who inform Jesus of the Greeks' request, to himself as the source of eternal life.

Jesus invites all who would follow him to be part of his paradoxical glorification of gaining eternal life by "hating" their lives: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." Jesus thus challenges us to follow him by "losing" our lives in selfless service and love now, in order to begin to live the eternal life we will enjoy fully when our lives in this world have ended and we have been "drawn" to the glorified Jesus.

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