

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

**Open with a prayer:** *God of our ancestors, you have entered into a new covenant with us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Help us to be more faithful to our covenant relationship with you. Bless us now as we prepare to share our lives and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** What are you most and least grateful for this week?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** In our first reading, Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that God will enter into with his people. This promise of a new covenant was fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The second reading is a beautiful example of the humanity of Christ.

Now read the assigned readings, pausing briefly after each reading.

### FIRST READING: Jeremiah 31: 31-34

In this reading, Jeremiah addresses a word of hope to the Israelites who are in Babylon. He tells them a time is coming when God will enter into a *new covenant* or partnership with them. The demands of the new covenant will not be written on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of the people. This is a reference to the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit who will live in the hearts of God's people, telling them what is right and wrong and how to respond obediently to God. Two characteristics of the new covenant will be "forgiveness" for Israel's past infidelities and "knowledge" of the Lord, i.e., a personal relationship with God. A new heart will replace their old hardened hearts.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 51

This is David's famous act of contrition, which he prayed when he committed the sins of adultery and murder. In the psalm, David pleads for mercy and a new heart.

### SECOND READING: Hebrews 5: 7-9

This is a beautiful passage on the *humanity* of Jesus. It speaks of Christ as pleading with God "in tears" and "loud cries." He became perfect or mature by the way he handled hardship, suffering and death. Because of his own experience of suffering, Jesus, our High Priest and brother, can sympathize with us in our pain and suffering. Also, through his suffering, Jesus is exalted and gains salvation for all who accept him.

### GOSPEL: John 12: 20-33

The religious leaders were worried that the "whole world" was flocking to the side of Jesus. The first evidence of this was the appearance of some Greeks who came to Philip and asked him if he could arrange for them a meeting with Jesus. Their presence shows that Jesus came not just to save the Israelites, but all people. Then Jesus begins his discourse. Some comments:

1. He begins his discourse by speaking of his "*hour*". This is a reference to Jesus' return to God. He will pass through death, be raised up and return to his Father.
2. Then Jesus uses the analogy of a *wheat grain* to speak of life and death. Just as a grain of wheat must first die before it bears fruit, so must Jesus die prior to his resurrection and so must we die to sin and selfishness before we bear Godly fruit in our lives. Married couples know this more than most. For the marriage to grow, each spouse must frequently die to their own desires.
3. "*Whoever loves his life, loses it and whoever hates his life, will preserve it.*" This means that the one who clings to his life and is just concerned about himself will eventually lose out. He will lose out on the meaning of life, which is to love and serve others. "... *hates his life,...*" Thomas Merton talks about our *true self* and *false self*. The *true self* is the part of us that seeks to follow God and his ways. The *false self* is the part of us that wants to be independent of God

and his ways, the part of us that is self-centered, controlling, jealous, etc. This self we must "hate", or we might say "deny", and not allow to control our lives. This false self must be transformed by praying, fasting and penance.

4. *"Whoever serves me, must follow me...the Father will honor whoever serves me."* Serving Jesus means, among other things, being willing to lay down one's life for others, being willing, like Jesus, to die to the desires of the false self. To serve Jesus is also to follow him in his path of love and to carry one's cross. Such service and love will honor the Father.

5. *"Save me from the hour."* This is a reference to Jesus' agony in the garden. It is another beautiful statement about Jesus' humanity. As a person who loves life and people, he has no desire to die. He recoils from it. Yet, if going through this "hour" is what he must do, then, he will embrace it.

6. *"Then came a voice from heaven."* This voice is reminiscent of the voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. *"I have glorified the Father."* Jesus gave "glory" to the Father (and so do we) by following the will of God. Jesus said elsewhere: *"I always do the things that please the Father."*

7. *"Now is the time of judgment on this world. Now the ruler of this world will be drawn out."* The judgment is our "yes" or "no" to Jesus. When we say "yes", love is released into the world and darkness and evil are overthrown and vice-versa.

8. *"When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself."* This is a reference to Jesus' cross and how the force of his love will attract and draw people to him.

## **FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse spoke to you most? Why?

2. How does the picture of a vulnerable Jesus praying to God with "loud cries and tears" touch you? How easy or hard is it for you to be this vulnerable before God? Do you tend to pray more with your head or heart?

3. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the "wheat grain that must die", and also says "who ever loses his life, will preserve it." Both these sayings are very contrary to our anti-aging environment. What is Jesus asking of us in these verses? Can you give one example of how losing your life may lead to spiritual growth?

4. Also in the Gospel, Jesus says: "Father, save me from this hour" (the hour of his suffering and death). Can you share an event in your life when you might also have said to God "save me from this hour"? What helped you to get through that hour? To what extent did that event, however painful, lead to growth in your life?

## **RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD**

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: Die to sinful attitudes/behaviors. The Sacrament of Reconciliation gives us an opportunity to look at where sin lives in our lives. It also gives us the opportunity to name that sin, renounce it and renew our covenant relationship with the Lord. Consider participating in your parish's Lenten Penance Service.

## **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Especially pray for all carrying a cross. Pray for the Elect of our parish. Pray that God moves "Easter church goers" to return to the Eucharist more frequently.

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Blessed are you, Father of Jesus, for you have brought us into the new covenant. You have made us brothers and sisters of Jesus and of one another. Help us always to live in your love. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Note to Facilitators:** Next week is Palm Sunday - the gospel is the Passion according to Mark. If you are going to read the Passion during your meeting, perhaps you can assign various members of the group to be prepared to read specified sections of the story. Or you may decide to read the Passion prior to the meeting. Also, read the extended commentary on the passion, which will help you to see Mark's specific objectives.