

## THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT – B

The gospel reading foretells Jesus' death and has reminiscences of the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane from the synoptic gospels. Jesus gives his life for the Father's glory and by his death now freely offered Jesus completes his life's work because it shows how great his Father's love is. In the first reading Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant which will be ratified by Jesus' death. In the second reading the letter to the Hebrews teaches that Jesus 'learnt obedience, Son though he was, through his sufferings,' and now he has become the source of salvation 'for all who obey him.'

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Jeremiah, one of the major prophets in Israel. He was called by God as a young man in the reign of Josiah, a good king of Judah when there were hopes for reform and a return to Godly ways. Josiah was killed in battle in 609 and with the rise of the Chaldean empire, king Nebuchadnezzar imposed his rule on Judah who sought support from Egypt. They revolted twice, in 597 and 587, which resulted in the capture and destruction of the Temple and the city, many of its inhabitants being carried off into slavery in Babylon. Jeremiah lived and worked in these final traumatic days, preaching, issuing threats of God's anger and foretelling the final disaster. He suffered greatly not only from those who considered him a defeatist because he was opposed to war as a solution to Judah's problems but also from his own inner conflicts. A man of peace he had to fight against the whole population from kings and priests to false prophets and the whole nation. He was a Job-like figure inwardly tortured by the work God had given him to do, but all this helped to purify his soul and he saw Israel's relationship with God in a new light. God looks at the heart and rewards each according to their works. So the new covenant (31.31-34) expresses a new start, a new relationship with God, the Law will no longer be written on tablets of stone but within the hearts of the people of Israel. Jeremiah died a failure, a fugitive in Egypt, but his teachings grew in importance in helping to shape the future of Israel. The reading, 31.31-34, records the new covenant in which Jeremiah's teaching reaches the highest peak of spirituality. The old covenant has been violated and God has new plans, a new covenant which is different in three respects: God will forgive sin; everyone will be responsible for their own behaviour; the Law will no longer regulate just external activity, 'deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts' and under the influence of the Holy Spirit they will have a new heart capable of knowing God, 'No, they will know me, the least no less than the greatest.' This new covenant will be inaugurated by the sacrifice of Christ and the apostles will proclaim its fulfilment.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 50.3-4,12-15, is a penitential psalm, a prayer of contrition. We pray to be like God who is pure and holy and by pardoning our sin God shows his power over evil and victory over sin. We acknowledge our guilt in the first verse. In the second we ask God to 'create' again. The justification of the sinner is the most wonderful of all the works of God and is analogous to the act of creation. In the final verse with God's help we assist in helping sinners to return to God.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 5.7-9, emphasizes the humanity of Christ so the first words of the reading are important because a priest must be human since he represents human beings and he must share their sufferings since he must feel compassion for them. 'Christ offered up prayer and entreaty,' on our behalf to the Father 'who had power to save out of death.' Christ 'submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard.' The prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane was a prayer of total submission to the will of his Father, it was heard and answered. God's 'power to save him' was not to save Christ from dying because dying on the Cross was the whole purpose of his life, but Christ was rescued from death after dying. The Father transformed Christ's death by raising him to glory on the third day. The last sentence has so much content. Christ learnt obedience through suffering 'Son though he was.' He was made perfect in fulfilling his office of Priest and Victim and thus 'he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation' – a very full reading.