

Homily For the 5th Sunday of Lent- Year B

St Peter's Sat 5:00PM/Sun 8:00AM Masses - March 20/21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34 "I will make a new covenant. I will write my law on their hearts. They shall know me."

Psalms 51:1-2,10-13 "Create in me a clean heart ... Sinners will return to you."

Hebrews 5:7-9 "Learning obedience by what he suffered, he became salvation for all who obey him."

John 12:20-33 "Should I say, Father save me from this hour? No! Lifted up, I will draw all people to me."

All It Takes Is One Grain of Wheat

Introduction

I was confused recently when I started hearing about sports stars being called goats. I wondered what huge mistake they had made. In my experience, the goat was always someone you could blame for having made the blunder that cost the game or even the championship. That idea was based on the biblical 'scape goat'. The people of Israel in the desert would symbolically place the sins of the people on the head of a goat and send it out into the desert, as an act of atonement, all the while asking forgiveness from God. So the goat was the one who carried the sins of the people.

Today's goat is neither of those. It's an acronym which stands for 'Greatest of all time'. Is Tom Brady now the GOAT after winning a 7th Superbowl? Is Michael Jordan still the basketball GOAT and Wayne Gretzky the hockey GOAT? Rappers like LL Cool J and Lil' Kim are now calling themselves the GOATs of the rap music game. On social media, people are even using the farm animal emoji when referring to GOATs.

One thing we are very good at in our culture is lifting people up to stardom. We have this incredibly powerful desire to have bigger than life heroes to look up to. And when that is not enough, we even need to add to that our cartoon and movie super powered super heroes.

But all of it, everything, is a replacement for the one true GOAT. God is not only the greatest of all time. God is the master and creator of time itself. In faith, we call our history 'salvation history' because the creator of time, the one who has created our nature, with all its capabilities, has entered into time, taken on our human nature, and has provided a way for that nature to be perfected and purified.

John

Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. They had heard he was the GOAT of great miracles. They wanted to see Jesus, the entertainer, the performer, the athlete. They wanted backstage passes, to hang out with the star, and maybe get a selfie with him. That's the impression here. But Jesus isn't interested in being like our culture's GOATs. He's not after their admiration. It's a frivolous request and he treats it that way, by ignoring it.

More importantly, he uses it as a teaching moment for the disciples who will have the task of the Greatest Message of All Time. This isn't the time for chit chat. It's the time for GLORY. But not the kind of glory that the stars of this world crave. It is glory that passes right through obedience, suffering and death. Yes, that's what I said: obedience, suffering and death. That's not what we want to hear. But listen to the Word of God explain these concepts.

Jesus uses two images in predicting his death. One is that of being 'lifted up.' He will be lifted up on the cross. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus already predicted that "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Now Jesus is not talking about being made into a rock star. Remember that God asked Moses to make a bronze image of the snake that was biting the people, to put it on a pole, and then order the people to look on it when they had been bitten. When they did this, they would be healed and not die.

The second image Jesus uses is a seed which falls into the ground and dies so it can produce fruit. I never think of it that way when I plant a seed. If I look at it from the seed's point of view, though, it gives itself up entirely, but gives forth

something far beyond itself. And it's true. When I dig up plants that have produced vegetables or flowers, there is nothing left of that seed. It has become something else, something more.

That's our job as Christians, to be a seed that is not preserved, like in a museum, but to be planted in the ground. But how are we to do that while we live? We can look at this both ways. One is that the seed is still itself but now is achieving its full potential. That is the way worldly thought expresses it. We don't like to think of losing what we are so something else can exist.

But what is really happening is that the seed is giving its DNA to the plant that will grow. There is no seed left. It has rotted away. In its place is the new plant with the fruit it gives. If the seed says to me, I want to stay as I am, nothing will come of it. Eventually it will rot away or dry up without producing anything.

Jeremiah

God made covenants with his people. A covenant is a promise, but not just any promise. It is a sacred oath that has a commitment attached to it. The prophet Jeremiah reports that God is going to make a new covenant with his people. What was the problem with the earlier covenant we might ask. Only that the people broke it! It takes two parties to make a covenant work and there was unfaithfulness on one side. The image of the marriage covenant is used. They broke my covenant, even though I was their husband.

God always knows of the tendency of people to be unfaithful. But he never gives up on us. By this new covenant, he says through Jeremiah: "They will know me." So, we get the sense that people did not truly know God. So, here is where we learn that knowing things about God is not the same as knowing God. Satan knows much about God, but does not have an intimate loving relationship with him. He refuses to serve God. The father of lies refuses to be in a covenant relationship. But Jeremiah says that something will change. They - the people - will KNOW him, in a deeper life giving relationship.

Psalm

The psalmist is asking God for mercy. But this isn't just any psalm. This is psalm 51, in which King David humbles himself. In it, he lets his pride die. He has to, we say, die to his pride and his sinful ways. And what sinful ways. This psalm is David's prayer after his adultery with another man's wife, then having her husband killed to cover it up. But what fruit it bears. David becomes 'a man after God's own heart'. He foreshadows the sinless saviour king, made perfect.

As with Jeremiah, this image is of marital unfaithfulness. However, as with David, forgiveness is not only possible, it is God's plan, to which we are invited to be partners. Both the people of Jeremiah's time and of David's suffered for their sin. So do we, and so do we need to let some things die in us.

Hebrews

The writer of Hebrews explains our faith with the same pattern.

1. The people of all times and all places break God's covenant of love, lusting after pleasure and power and self determination.
2. The people walked in darkness, hopelessly destined to repeat the same pattern, despite the infinite patience of God. There was no one with the authority to ask forgiveness for the sin of humankind.
3. The Father sent his Son, his only Son, whom he loves, as the fullest sign of all the covenants he made with the people in the past.
4. Jesus takes on the punishment for all the sin of all people of all time. His obedience is so perfect that his suffering is the seed which dies but, in the process, brings about the perfect fruit of salvation. Essentially,
 - Jesus is the goat upon whose head is placed the sins of the people.
 - Jesus is the goat who, on the cross, allows himself to be blamed for every one of our failures.
 - Finally, Jesus is the GOAT of all goats, the greatest of all time, because of his obedience and his submission to suffering and death.

Overcoming Our Greatest Fear

We have all kinds of ways to pretend that this life is not going to end. Dying is our biggest fear. We can describe this dying as a letting go of life. If we gain any wisdom from our lives, we will realize that our lives involve a long string of letting things go. This can be very good because it prepares us for that last letting go.

The Good News that we profess, the consistent Gospel message, is that death is not the end. It is the beginning of life. This is what the obedience of Jesus means. It is a grain of wheat which has to lose itself so it can become what it has been made for. We hold on to life as precious but it is what is planted that is precious.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen was the GOAT of the early television era. He was the greatest Catholic televangelist, with millions of viewers. On this topic of death, he said that if we think of only one dying, at the end of our life, we will be much afraid. He said that we must practice our dying in small ways every day. In this way, we will not be afraid. Those who die daily are used to it, and the fruit it brings. We call this 'dying to ourselves'. This is exactly the principle of what we have been trying to do during Lent. We don't want to call it death, especially when our children do it. But we are practicing little self deaths, by giving up some pleasure or other so we can make room for God to operate in our lives.

This remains our task for the rest of Lent. What will I die to? What part of me will be a seed that I plant so it can become fruit for the life of the world? Our Lenten journey is coming to an end. If we have taken it seriously, and heeded the Lord's call to conversion, we are invited to go even deeper, and consider how we can be those seeds which bear fruit in our lives and the lives of others. If we have not taken Lent so seriously, we can still do much in the time that remains. We can still die a little every day in these last two weeks, joining our small efforts to Jesus, our Lord, the GOAT, the greatest and most perfect of all time. In this way, we become the fruit he fell into the ground to produce. I can't think of anything greater than that. Can you?

Key Verses Today

Introduction: *Even Jesus "in the days of his flesh" offered up prayers and supplications. We need to acknowledge that we must die to ourselves and be open to God's word. Through our acceptance we will "bear much fruit."*

Jeremiah: *The days are surely 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 ... that they broke though I was their husband ... I will write my law on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They shall all know me, the least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their iniquity.*

Psalms: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. Wash me and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.*

Hebrews: *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers with loud cries and tears. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And, having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*

John: *Some Greeks came to Philip: "We wish to see Jesus." Jesus answered them: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very 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. 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 ... Now is the judgment of this world. Now, the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*