

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Lent- B 2018

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; HEBREWS 5:7-9; JOHN 12:20-33

Homilies are vehicles for breaking open the Word of God. First read the Sunday readings at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/031818-year-b.cfm>

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*... he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death,*

*"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say?  
'Father, save me from this hour'?"*

Where did Jesus offer up loud cries and tears to the one who could save him?  
When did Jesus ask "save me from this hour?"

... the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In next week's reading of the Passion account of the Garden we will hear how Jesus *"began to be troubled and distressed."*

Jesus said, *"My soul is sorrowful even to death."*

He prayed, *"that if it were possible the hour might pass by him."*

He said, *"Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will."*

St. Luke's Gospel adds, *"He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground."*

Can we put ourselves there with Jesus and feel the desperation?

Jesus clearly understood what would be expected of him in this final hour.

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

What followed was what was expected.

The traitor Judas led the crowd that had been sent by the chief priests to arrest Jesus.

Remember when a second ago I asked if you could put yourself there with Jesus?

That is an example of Ignatian prayer with Scripture.

When contemplating a Bible scene, one is invited to imagine themselves in the scene, maybe as a bystander or maybe as taking on the role of one of the characters.

Well, I can't avoid doing so with the Garden account.

Most of you know I retired from the Public Safety Department.

I know exactly what that arrest scene looks like, sounds like and feels like. I have been there with screaming crowds having to arrest one out of their midst among all the anger and bile.

I know what it is like to handcuff the arrestee and take him away in custody to answer to the charges leveled against him.

I know the freedom that has been stripped away from the arrestee. He is booked and put in his cell to await his appearance before the judge. He cannot choose to do otherwise. His last moment of decision-making came **before** he was arrested. He could have chosen differently and thus avoided the arrest.

I just know in my bones that much of that must have been the same for Jesus. Once arrested, Jesus was taken before the chief priests and Pilate. He was scourged, mocked and forced to carry his own cross. We know Jesus has access to power beyond what we mere creatures understand, but, as Paul tells us,

*“he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2: 7-8)*

Jesus’ moment of decision... in self-sacrifice... was at the Garden. The rest would flow in natural consequence to Calvary... and of course, to Easter.

Jesus showed us the way to life... through his passion, death and resurrection.

This is how we understand today’s Gospel reading.

The grain of wheat must die before it produces much fruit.

*“Whoever loves his life, loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.”*

When we love our life too much, we become afraid of what we might lose. We live in fear.

Some years ago, I went to a church conference where the speaker<sup>i</sup> challenged us to evangelize: to take Jesus to people and bring people to Jesus. It is commonly said that the second biggest denomination in the U.S. is fallen away Catholics.

If they had received the greatest message in the world, why had they fallen away?

Was it something we said? Maybe.

We try to do things to make it easier for folks to join us.  
We build nice buildings.  
We have good liturgy; we have music that attracts.  
We try to clear away those obstacles that had gotten in their way to be part of Church.  
Our speaker suggested that maybe part of the problem is in our trying to make Church easy for them.

Church was not easy for the early Christians.  
For many of them to become a Christian was signing their death warrant.  
This small cult, devoted to a deceased preacher from Palestine, grew in reputation when they chose death rather than to denounce Jesus.

The world knows of Jesus today in part because these martyrs withheld nothing from the one who gave his all for them.  
People of the Mediterranean were drawn to discover what kind of god could command such self-less devotion.

The speaker asked us to compare this with how people in our culture today aspire to acquire the promise of life.  
We look for a maximum return on our investment.  
We want to achieve with the least pain and receive with the most pleasure.  
And what we obtain we are anxious about losing.  
Often our anxiety of loss is only increased with each increase of possession.  
Does that satisfy?  
Is all that really living?  
Living with the fear of loss is death to one's vitality and to one's spirit.

So what about those people who seem to have the joy of life?  
How do they find it?

The speaker suggested something that has stayed with me all these years:  
One does not truly live, until one finds that for which it is worth dying.

Parents understand this.  
What parent has not asked God to take them so as to spare their child who was terminally ill?  
That is love. To live without having that kind of love is not living.  
Those who truly live with a joy, have found that for which it is worth giving all, even unto death.

Can we now understand how we must be like that grain of wheat?

I have heard a phrase from a number of sources that helps me remember this and live this:

*Die before you die so when you die, you won't die.*<sup>ii</sup>

What is it that you refuse to die to?

What is it you foolishly hang on to that keeps you from embracing God's love fully and for eternity?

I remember as a young man in prayer (if I can call it that) that I tried to bargain with God,

"Can't I be allowed to just have this one thing if I am good in everything else?"

Well, I wouldn't bet my eternity on it!

Use the rest of our Lenten season to practice being that grain of wheat.

*Die before you die so when you die, you won't die.* ✕

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<sup>i</sup> Rev. Tony Gittins, Province of Michigan Conference, 2002

<sup>ii</sup> John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom, The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, p.104