

Homily, March 21

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 51: 3-4, 12 – 15; Hebrews 5: 7-9; John 12: 20 – 33

In this season of Lent, we are called through the threefold discipline of prayer, fasting, and works of charity to examine ourselves in relationship to the teaching of Jesus...are our thoughts, words, and deeds “in-sync” with the teachings of the Lord. We embrace the Lenten discipline for the Lord to, in the words of Psalm 51 to **“create a clean heart in us.”**

As far as Lent is concerned the word “clean” is a key one to our understanding and appreciating the season that has only two more weeks. The word is connected not to a clean room or a clean house, not to clean windows or a clean plate, not to clean bathroom or clean clothes, but to a clean heart.

So, what does that mean obviously this prayer is not a petition for a successful angioplasty. In the almost 800 uses of the word “heart” in the Bible, the physical organ that beats in our chest is seldom mentioned. In the Bible the heart is at the center of an individual’s life. It is equivalent to a person’s inner life and personality; the heart is the seat of desires, emotions, thoughts, and plans that determines a person’s character and activities. For the same reason it is also the primary arena in which one meets God, and in which God works to cause change in a person’s way of life.

Just as a clean heart, free from cholesterol that clogs it and weakens it, is absolutely essential to our physical health, so must our spiritual heart be free of whatever might inhibit or prevent its proper functioning. And just as no one can operate on one’s own heart alone to clear out and clean up a clogged artery, so must we depend on the God of our heart to cleanse, renew and refresh our inner life for us.

This morning God tells us how he goes about creating a clean heart within us. Through the prophet Jeremiah God says, *“I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts.”* Over the centuries God and the Israelites had learned how often the original set of the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets had been broken. Moses had literally smashed these tables to smithereens in a blaze of anger and complete frustration over the people’s blatant disregard for God’s covenant. So, God decided on a new, radical approach, namely, to write the laws not on hard, brittle and breakable stone but on the soft, pliant and flexible flesh of the human heart. No longer would God’s laws be considered external commands, rigorously imposed on us by dictatorial force.

Rather, they would be internal rules, regulations and responsibilities that we have made a vital part of our own personal principles and priorities. Our love and loyalty to the Lord of these laws must come from deep within us, from the very center of our life (from our heart), if we are to mature in our relationship to God. Not external commands slavishly observed (as in an IRS tax code) out of fear and punishment, but internal conviction must be the key to loving God with a clean heart.

Today we begin the fifth week of Lent and perhaps more ready to listen to the Lord, more open to learn from Christ, more mindful of our limits and God's grace. At this point we may be ready to ask ourselves how we are living: as God's people or is our heart set on other ways? Whose instruction wells up in our heart to shape the path we walk daily? In Jeremiah's terms, whose word is "written on our hearts?" God has given us Jesus who creates in us a new heart on which is written God's laws so that we not only know them but also are enabled to live them.

We began this season of Lent five weeks ago confident of our ability to reform our lives. We will end this season in two weeks, God willing, less self-important and more humbled about our own ability to change things. We began Lent filled with all the good things we will do. We will end it, we pray, ready to declare all the good things God has begun in us. We began this Lenten journey, determined to improve our ways. We will finish it, we hope, ready to let God change our hearts so that we can be a strong and faithful witness to his word, Jesus Christ.

***Fr. Bill***