

## Unless a grain of wheat falls and dies ...

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – Cycle B – March 21, 2021**

**Readings:** Jer 31:31-34; Heb 5:7-9; Jn 12:20-33

*“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” (Jn 12:24)*

Prologue: Wheat was an important dietary staple of the people of Jesus’ context. With a spectrum of meanings ranging from being a basic food item to its trade value—for e.g., in 1 Kings 5:11, Solomon pays in part with wheat for the cedars from Lebanon—wheat can only be produced in abundance if it undergoes a process of falling (surrender), dying, and being reborn at harvests. Jesus uses this image to explain his surrendering and dying in order to be eventually ‘lifted up’.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. In the first reading, Prophet Jeremiah foretells the inauguration of a “new covenant” which God will make with God’s people. Jeremiah was prophesying during the most difficult period of Judah’s history—namely, from 627–587 BC—when kings, priests and people alike were more interested in forming political alliances to foster their welfare rather than trust in God’s providence. Threatened by the Babylonian Empire, they sought help from the Egyptians, a move which Jeremiah denounced. Moreover, there were abuses by the priests in temple practices and rampant idolatry by the people. Despite enduring perils and persecutions on all fronts, Jeremiah—who began prophesying when he was but 23 years old—persists in being the voice of God. The “new covenant with the house of *Israel* and the house of *Judah*” mentioned in v.31, refers to the northern kingdom (which had long since disappeared in 722 BC leaving behind some remnants) and the southern kingdom, respectively, that would come under God’s special care after the Exile. God likens the divine relationship with the people as Parent–child leading them “by the hand out of Egypt” and Lover–beloved as being “their husband” (v.32). Note the endearing images despite the people’s infidelity and idolatry. While the “old covenant” made at the time of the Exodus was cut on stone-tablets and demanded detailed dos and don’ts, the promise of a “new covenant” is made in the context of the Exile. This covenant would be interior and engraved on human hearts by a God who will “forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more” (v.34). Could anyone ask for more? This prediction is fulfilled in Jesus who seals a covenant not with animal sacrifice, but with his own blood: a sacrifice of his own self.
2. As we approach Holy Week, the themes of surrendering, suffering and dying are repeated. Jesus has triumphantly entered Jerusalem (Jn 12:12-19), and his fame, after raising Lazarus from the dead (Jn, ch. 11), precedes him. The crowds at the Passover are excited to see him, the disciples are expecting great gains for themselves, while the Pharisees and Jesus’ foes realize that they cannot stifle his popularity, saying among themselves: “Look, the world has gone after him!” (v.19). Amidst the Jewish multitudes there are some Greeks (Gentiles), too, who express their desire “to see Jesus” (v.21). “To see” does not merely mean to perceive with one’s eyes as one would gaze at a monument, but rather to make meaning of Jesus’ life and to receive a revelation of ‘who’ he really is. The text says nothing about whether the Greeks actually see Jesus or not. However, Jesus announces that his “hour has come ... to be glorified” (v.23), unlike what was hitherto claimed: that his “hour” (2:4; 7:30; 8:20) had not yet come.

3. Jesus describes his death on the cross with two images: (a) the grain of wheat—an image of nature, which is familiar to all, also found in 1 Cor 15:37; and, (b) of him being “lifted up” which is evangelist John’s way of describing Jesus’ death-and-resurrection. Both these images are, somehow, an answer to the Greeks’ request “to see Jesus”. Jesus uses the grain of wheat to teach his disciples some truths difficult to understand: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (v.25). Jesus adds, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also” (v.26), meaning, discipleship demands *being* with Jesus, *following* him, *doing* what he did: surrendering and dying, to be “lifted up”. Jesus’ prayer here is known as the ‘Johannine Gethsemane’ since it echoes the Gethsemane episode: “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*” (v.27). Ironically, Jesus’ *hour* of glory is not his, but his Father’s! “Father, glorify *your* name!” (v.28). Note that, while most of Jesus’ disciples see Jerusalem as the pinnacle of power and the shrine of glory which, in their minds and imagination, Jesus is all set to conquer, Jesus sheds self-glory (ego), but exults in giving glory to God: Abba, Father. Indeed, only when one willingly and generously surrenders, sacrifices oneself and dies will one produce a golden harvest in life!

#### **Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the General Theme:**

- The responsorial psalm (51), traditionally termed the *Miserere*, is a famous penitential psalm attributed to David. The penitent prays for forgiveness and newness: “A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me!” This transforms Jeremiah’s prophesy in the first reading about the inner “new covenant” engraved upon human hearts into a prayer focusing on forgiveness of sins, inner transformation and newness.
- Like the gospel, the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews is also a reflection of Jesus’ agony. At its core, the Letter juxtaposes the old covenant with the new and shows how the latter supersedes the former. This is so because the former is exterior, dependent on the blood-sacrifice of animals, while the new covenant is an interior self-sacrifice. God’s Son, Jesus, empties himself and becomes like us: “During his life on earth, Christ offered up prayers and entreaties with loud cries and tears ... Although he was Son, he learned obedience through suffering” (vv.7-8). Isn’t it consoling that Christ is present in our cries and sufferings? He *is* that grain of wheat that died and rose again.

**Food for Thought:** Like that grain of wheat, we too are all called for self-sacrifice. Death is not just an end-time event. I must die daily. In her diary entitled ‘*An Interrupted Life*’, a Dutch Jewess, Etty Hillesum (27), who died in the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1943 wrote: “Every day I shall say farewell. And the real farewell, when it comes, will only be a small outward confirmation of what has been accomplished within me from day to day.” Am I, are You, ready for a daily death?

**In Lighter Vein:** Diogenes, the cynical philosopher (approx. 412–323 BC), lived in utter poverty with disdain for worldly things and passing fame. He allegedly mocked Alexander the Great. On one occasion, Alexander saw him examining a pile of bones and asked him: What are you looking for?” Diogenes replied: “Something which I cannot find.” Alexander asked again: “And what is that?” Diogenes retorted, “The difference between your father’s bones and those of his slaves.” Death is the great leveler; Christ is the guarantor of us being lifted up.

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