**5th Sunday of Lent 21st March 2021**

**Notes on the Readings used at Mass**

**Jeremiah 31;31-34**

Jeremiah is addressing the Jews, exiled and in slavery to the Babylonians. He tells them that their lot is due to the faithlessness of their ancestors who failed to keep the Covenant of Moses.

In the name of Yahweh (aka The Lord) Jeremiah promises a new ‘covenant’ but not on stone, this time, but one written on the hearts of his people. All of them will then "know" him, that is, willingly live in obedience to his law. In the whole of the Old Testament this is the clearest hope for a new covenant. Earlier prophets had dwelt on technical legalities, but Jeremiah highlights the need for the people to embrace the covenant willingly.

From the time of Paul, Christians have seen the fulfilment of this prophecy in the covenant that was established by the blood of Christ and that led to the outpouring of the Spirit into the hearts of believers (2 Corinthians 3:6ff).

The greatest tribute to Jeremiah was paid by Jesus, himself. On that night before the Lord went to his death, he brought the most solemn promise of the prophet to fulfilment: 'this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20). God had fulfilled the hope that Jeremiah had voiced, six hundred years earlier.

**Responsorial Psalm: 51:1-2, 10-13**

This psalm, the Miserere, is the most famous of the penitential psalms. It takes up and turns into a prayer Jeremiah's prophecy that under the new covenant the hearts of believers will be inwardly transformed, so that their sins will be forgiven and they may walk in the law of the Lord.

**Second Reading Hebrews 5:7-9**

‘Hebrews’ is an important, though problematic writing. It is not a letter, but rather an essay. We do not know the author or his readers though they sound like Jewish Christians in need of reassurance. They sound as if they comprise one congregation, though we have no idea where. They may have been persuaded that Jesus was the Messiah and so still thought of themselves primarily as a Jewish sect. They are familiar with the Old Testament and Rabbinical methods of argument.

The author portrays Jesus as a better qualified priest than those of the old priesthood, especially if the document postdates the destruction of the temple. He points out that, though Jesus was not of the Levitical priestly family, then Melchizadek, whom Abraham accepted as a priest, was not even Jewish!

A priest is a human being having the approval of a community to present their representations to God. In this function, he must be acceptable to God as well as to the community he represents though God can receive anyone he chooses.

The readers are being told that Christ through his death offers his own life-blood to his Father to obtain forgiveness for our sins. To-day’s snippet comes from a section defending Christ’s suitability for a priest. The author dwells on his experience as a human being. He knows what he is talking about. He has suffered as much as anyone. Yet, he is without sin and has perfect access to God’s presence.

We read this to-day because of our preparation for the Passion, but I believe that the author of Hebrews is thinking of Jesus’ whole life, of which the Passion was but representative. See, for instance the opening words ..... “*During his life on earth ......”*

**Gospel John 12:20-33**

Like the story about Nicodemus that we read last week, a historical incident is used today as a springboard for a Johannine ramble. We often stress the differences between John and the Synoptics. But there is nowhere in his Gospel that demonstrates more John’s awareness of the older tradition than in this story. See, for example the passages in Mark (4;3-9, 26-29, 30-32, 8;34ff 14;32-42) and the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. John is taking the Synoptic tradition for read and is providing additional teaching on its deeper meaning.

We are not told what happened to the Greeks—whether they really got to see Jesus or not. But do not think that this means that for John, this detail is unimportant.

John wrote his Gospel with such people in mind and he deliberately does not tell us that Jesus received the Greeks. It is their very enquiry that is important and not the answer. The importance is that it signals the Gentiles need of acceptance and that the time is right for the reconciliation of the two cultures.

But reconciliation cannot be achieved until the Crucifixion, which is why the Greeks have to wait. They cannot "see" Jesus—that is, receive salvation—until he has been crucified.

Historically this was what happened. The contacts of Jesus during his earthly ministry were almost exclusively confined to his own people (see Romans 15:8), and his contacts with Gentiles were strictly exceptional (the Greeks in this story, the Syro-Phoenician, a woman in Mark, and the centurion before the Cross—each time there is a reluctance on the part of Jesus to break the barrier). It was only later that Hellenistic Christians began preaching to Gentiles (Acts 11) and the Church began to lose its Jewishness.

But there was also a theological reason why Jesus restricted his contacts to the Jews. It was only after the wall of partition had been broken down—that is, the Jewish law as a barrier between Jew and Gentile—that the Gentile mission could begin. Thus, the grain of wheat has to die before it can bring forth fruit (win Gentile converts), and the Son of man has to be "lifted up" (Johannine language for the crucifixion/resurrection) before the Gentiles can be brought in.

In the Fourth Gospel Jesus often speaks of his 'hour,' his supreme moment, when all that he came to do on earth will be accomplished. At the wedding feast (2:4) he told his mother that his ‘hour had not yet come’. In 7:30 and 8:20 he is not arrested because the 'hour' has not yet arrived. Now, with the arrival of the Greeks, it has. It is the start of the Passion and he immediately starts talking about his death.

The passion is imminent and he fears it and yet longs for it. His soul is troubled. Should he ask the Father to save him from the cross? No! he sets his mind to fulfil his task: 'It is for this reason that I have come to this hour.' Further, he is sure that in this hour of crisis and suffering he will be glorified.

Throughout John’s Gospel we have themes running like strands of coloured wool. In successive passages they are woven into combinations that create scenes of infinite depth. In to-day’s reading, the hour is one such theme, here combined with glory, wheat (= Eucharist), death and eternal life.