

Some of you may be aware that last Sunday was what is known as Laetere Sunday. Laetere means to rejoice in Latin. We are to rejoice in anticipation of Easter and to give ourselves a break from our Lenten disciplines. On this Sunday we permit flowers on the altar.

Well, I mistook my Sundays and had Ronny schedule the flowers given in memory of Jean's nephew for this, the fifth Sunday of Lent. Doubtless I shall have to commit some kind of penance for this liturgical violation but in a way I am glad I did because rejoicing is exactly what we should be doing as we engage our readings for this Sunday.

Why, you might ask, because they none of them seem to be that exciting. But they are, they are. Each of our four readings attests to the ever-expanding all-inclusive nature of God's love for us all.

In our reading from Jeremiah God has apparently given up his expectations for humanity. Despite the fact that time and again God had attempted to provide us with laws and teachings that would help us to live full lives in peace and obedience we managed to screw things up and be punished for it. God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden for their disobedience; God destroyed much of creation in the Flood, saving only Noah and his family; God kept the first generation of refugees from Egypt from reaching the Promised Land because they had behaved so badly during their wandering in the wilderness; and in Jeremiah's time God will allow the Babylonian Empire to sack Jerusalem and carry off its best and brightest into captivity because the kings (and people) had broken all of the commandments.

Yet God persisted in making other covenants. It seems that even for divine beings the definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result. Now God is promising to make a new covenant, but this time this time the covenant will be written on the hearts of God's people. This covenant will not be inscribed in stone, this covenant will not be written in scripture, this covenant will be so powerful that all will know God and follow God and know that God will forgive their sins. This proposes a new vision for the future, a new kind of obedience that will enable us to live into what God has offered. Talk about transformation! It sounds fantastical, but this is what happens when we know God in our hearts. It doesn't mean that we don't have our doubts and fears or that we always behave as we should p but like the microchip in our pets, this covenant in our hearts will allow us to return to the Lord, to be forgiven when we fall, and to know ourselves to be one of God's people.

As Christians we understand this new covenant to refer the coming of Jesus.

Jesus, the word made flesh, God incarnate, yet also human, human enough to share our pain, our grief, and our joy. Our reading from Hebrews talks about Jesus as the high priest. It is Jesus who will intercede for us and it is Jesus who will, in a way, be the ultimate offering and sacrifice to God on our behalf. Jesus, who "learned obedience through what he suffered" after offering up prayers and supplications, loud cries and tears. Obedience is key here but the suffering is not for the sake of suffering. God was not torturing his son in order to teach him obedience, nor does God make us suffer in order to teach us obedience. Jesus' suffering was for a specific purpose- through it he was able to transcend the usual human resistance to obedience, especially in difficult circumstances. Jesus overcame temptation to live as a god, Jesus overcame temptation to be treated as a king or to play into the people's hopes for

revolution, Jesus overcame temptation to resist responding to violence with violence, and he overcame the temptation to ask God to spare him from death. So yes, that involved suffering, the same way making a choice to leave home involves homesickness, or to leave a marriage involves regrets and the need to admit our own mistakes, or the multitude of decisions that we make over a lifetime that have both positive and negative outcomes.

We cannot avoid suffering in life, especially since many of our life events are random; think about the pedestrian bridge collapse in Florida – you are driving under a bridge, then suddenly...wham. 6 people are dead and authorities won't know if there are others until the debris has been cleared. These things don't happen for a reason, even though we like to think that they do because that gives us the sense that there is some order in the universe. God may have plans for our salvation but they don't usually impact us on the individual level. On the other hand we can make sense of what happens to us by trusting that Jesus is walking with us, by remaining focused on where we hear God calling us and how we feel the Spirit moving.

Looking at the state of the world we may wonder how this could be true but it is made real one person at a time. Our psalmist illustrates what this means throughout all 176 verses of Psalm 119. The psalm is one long hymn of praise to God's law but law here is far more than mere legalism. There is joy and delight and hope and forgiveness, an appreciation of what it means to be dependent and to trust in God's mercy. Obedience is also at the heart of our passage today. Obedience is defined in six different ways – paying attention to God's word, following God's commandments, holding onto God's promises, paying attention to God's statutes, remembering God's judgments, respecting God's decrees. These different words for God's teaching are quite liberating. It means that God speaks to us not just through scripture but through creation, and through the direct interactions people have had with God throughout the ages: God walking with Abraham, Moses speaking with God on Mt. Sinai, the prophets giving voice to God's words, the experience of mystics right up to our present day, and most of all in the person of his son, Jesus. That's why we can talk about the ever-expanding, ever more inclusive nature of God's covenant, the covenant that will be written in our hearts because of God's love for us all.

Our gospel lesson brings all this into focus. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. He is now famous for having raised Lazarus from the dead and makes a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Some Greeks who were gentiles but Jewish sympathizers come looking for him. On hearing this Jesus declares that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." The hour is marked by the arrival of those who will be drawn to him from outside of Israel. From the very first covenant with Abraham all people were to be reconciled to God through the witness of Israel. This is the moment in which it begins through Jesus.

John's gospel does not describe Jesus' baptism or having Jesus hear God's voice naming him the beloved son. Nor does John's gospel have a transfiguration scene but now in this moment when Jesus speaks about his upcoming glorification and its consequences, when he admits that his soul is troubled and he says "should I say "Father, save me from this hour?" He answers his own question saying "No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." In that moment God speaks. God's voice sounds like thunder. Perhaps the words were not clear but those standing by know that something extraordinary has happened.

Jesus' obedience has been transformed; his obedience has become the catalyst for our own transformation into the children of God. He knows that when he dies he will draw all people to himself. This man, the Son God, will write God's word on our hearts. Jesus, the Word of God is not just words in a book, he is not just a model for good ethical behavior, he is not impervious to sorrow or pain. He is our intercessor and high priest. He is the Son of God who draws all people regardless of race, or nationality, sexual identity or gender, age, ability or disability, economic status, education, or even criminal status, he draws all people to him.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Amen