

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent + 17 March 2024 + Jer 31:31-34 + Heb 5:7-9 + Jn 12:20-33

We have come to the end of our reflections on the Covenants that God made with His people in our 1<sup>st</sup> readings. So let's look back on where we have been over Lent. We first considered how God's Covenant with Noah to never destroy all people by flood waters on account of our sins prefigured Baptism, where the waters wash away our sins and bring us new life in Christ. We then looked at God's Covenant with Abraham, where God promised to bless all nations of the earth through his countless descendants, because Abraham obeyed God in faith. And how this Covenant prefigured the Eucharist, whereby we receive the greatest of all blessings—the Body and Blood of Christ, and so become one Body with Him. We then examined how God gave to Moses and the Israelites the 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai, and how they swore to God to remain in Covenantal relationship with Him by keeping these commandments of life. And last week, we asked the question of what could be done when God's people of old and today fail to keep our part of the Covenant when we sin, and how God made a remedy of mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

And now today, we come to where this survey of salvation history has been leading up to: that Jesus Christ is the New and Eternal Covenant between God and man, who saves us and sets us free. Meaning, all of the Covenants of the Old Testament—*Testament*, as we said, means *Covenant*—they were provisional and ultimately fulfilled in the life and person of Jesus Christ. We have some very important theological ground to cover today, so hang on!

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today comes from the Letter to the Hebrews, a book which, through 13 chapters, gradually makes this same point. It opens by noting (1:1-3): *In times past*, that is, in the Old Covenant, *God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days*, meaning, in the days of New Covenant in Jesus Christ, *[God] spoke to us through a son, [Jesus], whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word.*

Right here the author explains that God the Father *created and sustains the universe* through Jesus, the Son of God; that Jesus is *refulgence*, meaning, “visible splendor” *of his glory*, and *the very imprint of his being*; or more literally, “the exact likeness” of his being. To sum it all up, the author is saying what we all believe but what was so unbelievable at first: Jesus is one with God the Father! But the author of Hebrews continues: *When he had accomplished purification from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high.* Jesus is not just one with the Creator; He is also the Savior—the one who has *accomplished purification from sins*. This is essentially the same claim as he makes in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, where we hear that Jesus, *Son though he was... learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* Let's look at this *purification from sins* and *eternal salvation* more deeply.

First, *purification from sins*. When God made His covenant with Noah, never to destroy the human race again on account of our sins, Noah offered an animal sacrifice on the altar he had made. When God made His covenant with Abraham to bless all nations through his descendants, Abraham offered the sacrifice of a ram instead of his own son on the altar. When God made His covenant with Moses and the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai, Moses constructs the Tabernacle as the place at which to offer sacrifice. But animal sacrifices could ever actually take away, or *purify* the people from their sins. Only a perfect God can purify our sins. And that's exactly what He did. God offered Himself on the Cross, in Jesus Christ, to purify us from our sins, and in doing so, to become our *eternal salvation*.

And so the Son of God was completely *obedient* to God in our place—after all, obedience to God is the opposite of sin—it is sin's undoing. He took upon Himself all of the consequences of sin—all of our *suffering*. *And when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*. That word *perfect* in Greek is fascinating; it means: *complete, to per-fect, to consummate, to work through an entire process to reach the conclusion*. It is the same word that Jesus cries out on the Cross, that our English (Jn 19:30) translations just can't quite capture: "it is finished!" *It is perfected, consummated, complete!*

On the Cross, Christ completes/fulfills the Old Covenant, by instituting the New Covenant. Sins have finally been atoned for, and we have been brought back into a Covenantal/family relationship with God the Father through the blood of His Son. Because we are made one with the Son in Baptism and in the Eucharist, we can now call the Son's Father *our* Father. After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus will pour forth His Spirit upon His apostles, and upon all who believe in Him. The Spirit is God's own divine love within us, making us finally capable of keeping the Covenant: by loving God and our neighbor. And we receive the love of the Father and the Son—the Holy Spirit—through Baptism and Confirmation.

And so Jesus *perfects* the prophecy of our 1<sup>st</sup> reading today from the Prophet Jeremiah, that *The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a **new** covenant with the house of Israel... I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people... I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more*. The Holy Spirit is the law of God—the New Covenant—written on our hearts. When God's own love is within us, little by little, we no longer *want* to sin, and that's where true freedom from sin, where eternal salvation really begins.

But we have gotten a little ahead of ourselves. In this last week of Lent, and especially next week—Holy week—we must first walk with Jesus as He becomes the *grain of wheat [that] falls to the ground and dies, so as to produce much fruit*. We are the fruit of that sacrifice, that death. A death that didn't end there, in death, but was raised—was *lifted up from the earth*, so that He might draw everyone to Himself.