

Sunday March 21st, 2021

Fifth Sunday of Lent Parishioner Reflection

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Over the years, we come to understand the Christian call to transformation much more deeply. Interestingly, the covenants and the stories of how the Old Testament Israelites struggled to keep them, display our Christian childhood and the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles reflect more profoundly Christian adulthood. As children we learn all the correct social and conventional behaviours but as adults, through the struggles we experience with ourselves, we recognize that our inner dispositions need to change—a change of heart is needed. The prophet Jeremiah becomes aware of this as he struggles to lead and correct his people and he prophesies that one day God “will make a new covenant with them, says the Lord and this new covenant is to be written in our hearts.”

In ancient Jewish culture, external observance of the law was what counted the most: ritual purity by washing the hands, face and body and the avoidance of impure things, foods and acts. The mitzvot (laws) were many and even though the 10 commandments were viewed as particularly important, their significance was buried beneath a mound of other rules and obligations.

Under our new covenant in Jesus, internal dispositions and desires are what count the most and they must be transformed and as a result, the external behaviour changes because of this transformation of our inner selves. An example of this is in the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus tells us not only avoid murder but to eliminate the anger which leads to it. In the same reading, Jeremiah tells us “for they shall know ME.” This is Christ revealing the truths of who God is through His example, ministry and most of all through the sacrificing of Himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Hebrews echoes this concept when the author asserts: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what He suffered, and having been made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.” (Hebrews 5:7-9)

In the Gospel we hear: “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.” (John 12:25) Jesus is not calling us to literal death nor to some sort of spiritual death. Indeed, spiritual death is damnation and is the death to be avoided above everything. Rather, we are being called to die to ourselves in our egotism, selfishness, pettiness and to all the hidden motives that lead us to sinful behaviour. This self-renunciation calls us to carry our crosses and follow the example of our Lord.

The scriptures move through refraining from external practices to changing the motives for the actions in the first place. For example, the commandments God gave to the Israelites told them not to steal or to kill. We are still bound by the same. However, often we steal because we envy; we kill because we are angry. The motives behind the actions of stealing or killing provide the reasons for carrying out the actions in the first place. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to a purification of the motives by drying up their source, the stream of selfishness, egotism and narcissism that feeds envy, anger, lust and greed. This is the death of which He speaks...the utter transformation of our inner lives and the incredible freedom which this gives us. Hence why Saint Augustine was able to utter the pithy saying: "Love and do what you will." Free of ego, selfishness and all the concomitant desires, we will choose to love always and in all things. For us, this is impossible to do but for God all things are possible. During Lent, we embrace penances not because they are good in themselves but that they may open our hearts and minds to see ourselves for who we are and that we may turn to Him who is the source of all for help as we struggle with our selfishness...egotism...and ultimately, our need. We are limited creatures who may often live with the delusion of self-sufficiency but if we reflect but a moment, we can see that all which we claim for ourselves is an illusion; God is the source and ground of our being—He will provide us with what we need, the grace to persevere, to hope in Him and to love always despite our weaknesses.