

29 March, 2009
Fr. Richard L. Green

Well here we are, the fifth Sunday of Lent. I think we're going to make it.

This morning I want to look at this reading from Jeremiah and hook that in with the gospel. Jeremiah is from the time of the exile and the structures that had been the signs of the relationship that the Israelites had with God were pretty much destroyed. The temple had been destroyed. In many ways the priestly caste had been destroyed, or at least taken into exile.

And there is this looking ahead to where this is all going. In one way, it's going back to Jerusalem. That's a part of it. But there's a bigger destination and I sense that in this there is a looking forward into the same place that, in the gospel, Jesus is looking forward to. There's a spiritual evolution that's at work. And what's involved in that is an internalization of the relationship between God's people and God. And through that, the relationship that you have with one another.

Now it's a tendency for Christians to look back at ancient Judaism and say, 'Oh those people were all caught up in law and hierarchy and that sort of thing. And in Christ we don't worry about that.' And my response is, "Since when?" We talk this life of being liberated from law and then we practice Phariseism.

And what Jeremiah and Jesus are both looking at is the way in which we have externalized all of this and not internalized it. When God says to the people through Abraham that 'I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts', it's an internalization of what it is that God desires for us. And what God desires for us is the end to alienation. The end to alienation from God and from one another. And that alienation is all about idolatry. And I don't mean we're out worshipping golden calves, though Wall Street could be seen as a golden calf. We turn to Wall Street to save us. But that's another sermon – or not.

But this turning to the self as a god. We do all things for the self. And that's the source of the alienation. The myth of freedom and the way we practice freedom is so often actually more enslaving. This license that we try to live in in this country – that we think that what freedom is is the freedom to make a mess of everything in our over-consumption. I'm free to destroy myself and the whole world around me! Isn't that grand?! Thank goodness for the founding fathers! They freed us to destroy.

When Jeremiah is telling the people (for God) that this law will be written on their hearts and this internalization is going to take place and when Jesus is saying that we need to die to this world – they're talking about the same sort of thing. Jesus is not saying that we should become a suicide cult. That this world is so awful, that God's creation is so sinful and broken because of Adam and Eve that we should get out of here as quick as possible. That's not what he's saying at all. Because the word, 'cosmos' in Greek is not the word that's used for the creation, to describe what God has made here. It's to

describe what we have made. It's that alienated world that worships at the altar of self. That is what we must die to. That is what must go.

And it was the way, when Jesus was looking forward to his crucifixion (and I don't mean looking forward like looking forward to Easter or Christmas or your birthday), he knows what's going to happen. The way in which he was going to engage that, both the religious authorities and the secular authorities; the governmental authorities. He did it in such a way to show their impotence.

When he says to Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, he's saying it has nothing to do with your impotent powers, all based in violence. And he says that they have no authority over him that he hasn't given them. He's pointing out the impotence of the structures and the systems that we have constructed in this world. They may be in some ways necessary, but they are not the kingdom of God.

For us to bear true fruit like Jesus, we must die to that. We must die to the structures of this world and stop rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

And it's terrifying because we really think that we don't know what to do without all these exterior structures and authorities and laws. We've been told for how many generations that we don't know what to do without somebody else telling us. And one of the most telling things is constantly going around saying we are a nation of laws and we have convinced ourselves that we don't know what to do. Somebody's got to take responsibility for us because we don't know what to do. And I would say wherever there was the voice of the evil one whispering in our ears, *that* is the message.

Because, my brothers and sisters, there is not a person sitting in this room who doesn't know what to do. You know what to do. Love the lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. And the rest is details. We know what to do.

We know what to do. And Jesus has shown us what it is that we are responsible for doing in the face of those who still don't think they know what to do. We show them the impotence of their institutions and we let them do what they're going to do.

He says to us that we are to follow him. And it is frightening, just as he was frightened in the garden before they came to take him away. But that's our call. If we are to follow Christ, we are to not resist and we are to stand in witness to the impotence of the institutions and the ideas of those who take it upon themselves to act in the place of God.

And as frightening as it is to say, if they come to kill us, let them come. If they come to take our stuff, let them come. If they come to enslave us, they have no idea what freedom is. For us to truly follow Christ, we are to follow Christ. And if it takes dying to all of what we believe to be our life in this world, then so be it.

That is the example that we have before us and the invitation that we have, to truly be transformed so that the covenant that we have with God is not on stone tablets but in our hearts. And that we are the body of Christ in the world. We say that all the time.

And what Christ did in his body and with his body was to sacrifice it so that that covenant that we have with God would be written on more and more and more hearts. And that in time, in God's time, we will be fully realized as living under that covenant that all of God's creation lives in that relationship with God. Not one of law, but of love.

Amen.