

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year B
March 21 & 22, 2015
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"..the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant which I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.... I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts..." (Jer. 31:31-33)

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:11)

"...having been made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who obey him." (Heb. 5:9)

"Sir, we would see Jesus." (St. John 12:21)

What do men & women look for in their religious faith?

Men & women express 3 fundamental needs:

1. Some authoritative guidelines for character & conduct – a **standard to live by** and to help **live responsibly**.
2. Fellowship with the Divine – **an awareness of God's presence with them**.
3. An **inward cleansing – forgiveness** of their sins when they break those guidelines, and the fellowship with the Divine is broken.

As we come to the last week of Lent & prepare for Holy Week, the Church's Lectionary leads us closer to the Cross and the Passion of our Lord. Our Readings today focus our attention on those 3 fundamental needs I just mentioned.

It was God Himself who made the covenant at Mt. Sinai with His people through Moses, and the people were asked to respond. It was based on the **ten Commandments**, and was intended to meet those 3 needs.

1. It was a **standard to live by** – it outlined our obligations & responsibilities

2. It met the demand for **fellowship with God** by establishing the priesthood. The Jewish Priest was to be the intermediary between God and His people.
3. It met the demand for **cleansing** by establishing the system of sacrifice. – the sacrifice of sheep & goats. By continually repeating the sacrifices & following the religious observances, divine favour would be achieved and pardon secured.

But even the Old Covenant proved unsatisfactory – all it did was to **symbolize mankind's fallen state** – the more people tried to follow the laws, the more they failed. The more they failed – the more laws they created. The more laws they created, the more there were to break. Eventually people began to feel enslaved to the Law. How could the Priest – a mortal man & a sinner like all the rest – bridge the gulf and bring men & women into the presence of the Divine? How could the slaying of animals, and the splashing of blood, cleanse from sin? They were never sure their offering was good enough – the sacrifices had to be continually offered.

The Old Covenant was **external** – imposed from outside. The New Covenant was to be **internal** – *"I will write it upon their hearts."* We human beings can make all the laws we want, but this will NOT create a just & peaceful society – the more laws we make, the more laws we have to break. **Evil cannot be erased by laws** – the world will only change when people change – and people will only change when their hearts are changed.

With the New Covenant people are to have a **personal encounter** with God. It is to be a personal relationship as well as a corporate one – *"They shall know me"* says God. No more second-hand dealings with the Divine through imperfect intermediaries. The priesthood was NOT done away with – but its emphasis was changed – it was now to be the **offering of priest & people TOGETHER** – a true Liturgy – all were to have direct access to the Divine. This is why our Anglican Prayer Book states on page 66: *"There shall be no celebration of the Lord's Supper, except there be at least one person present to communicate with the Priest."* For us Anglicans the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist is the offering of Priest & people together – it is NOT the Priest's Mass.

The sacrifice of animals as substitutes for the sins of the people will be obsolete – God Himself will provide the sacrifice.

"The days are coming", said Jeremiah. **The days are NOT coming** – they have **already come with the** coming of Christ, declares our writer of the Letter to the Hebrews – Jesus is the High priest after the *"order of Melchizedek"* and *"has become the source of eternal salvation."* Jesus **IS the New Covenant.**

Jesus personalizes the Law. The Old Law was impersonal – a set of rules given in stone. Jesus says: *"I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill the law."* – Jesus IS the Law – our faith is not in a set of rules – **but in a person.** Our relationship with the Divine is not to be regarded in legal terms – **but in LOVE** – *"I will put my law in them, and I will write it upon their hearts."* *"Sir, we would see Jesus",* said those Greeks to Philip.

Divine fellowship is possible because Jesus is our High priest – a Priest in the true sense of the word. By His birth in Bethlehem (*"in the days of his flesh"* – as our 2nd reading today puts it) – He is one with us – Jesus was fully human – and so he can rightly represent us to God. But Jesus is also divine – God's only-begotten Son – *"God of God, Light of light, very God of very God"* – and so He can truly represent God to us.

Cleansing & forgiveness is assured because God Himself makes the offering. In the Old Covenant it was the people who offered the sacrificial animals as an atonement for their sins. But in the New Covenant, it is God who offers the sacrificial Lamb – He offers Himself for the sins of the world. The New Covenant is made through the blood of Christ – *".. this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."* St. John reminds us in his 1st Epistle: *"He is the propitiation for our sins"* St. Pater writes: *"He bore our sins in his own body on the Tree."* The Cross is our altar of sacrifice – for there the Son of Man was glorified, and made the full, perfect & sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. No other sacrifice is necessary for it was a **perfect sacrifice** – on the Cross Jesus fulfilled His mission – He accomplished what He was sent to do – earn eternal salvation for all believers. Jesus Himself is both the Victim and the Victor – the Paschal Lamb.

Jesus meets the 3 fundamental needs of men & women:

1. He is the Law – the standard to live by. He is the norm – the model – the visible embodiment of how to live in a right relationship with God and with other people.
2. He is the source of **fellowship with the Divine** – *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life"*. He is our true High Priest – perfect Man and

perfect God – like us in every way except, says the write of Hebrews
"without sins "

3. He is our **sacrificial Lamb – the** Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – the Lamb offered **by God** Himself on behalf of us – for the *"forgiveness of sins"*.

As we come to the final weeks of our journey to Easter by way of the Cross, may our prayer each day of that journey **be** that of those Greek visitors: *"Sir, we would see Jesus. "*