

Fifth Lent Sunday of Lent – Year B
(Apr. 2, 2006)

“We Would Like to See Jesus”

Our readings today begin with hope – hope. We all need lots of hope, living as we do in a world that sometimes seems hopeless what with war in the Middle East, genocide in Darfur, the aftermath of hurricanes in Louisiana and Mississippi, homicide on the streets of our cities, decaying school buildings and school systems, and so forth and so forth and so forth.

This homily is not meant to be a downer. On the contrary I cite all these negative things in contrast to the good news that we hear in our readings. In spite of everything God is with us, just as God was with God’s people during their Babylonian captivity as we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. God tells them, “I will make a new covenant with my people. . . . I will place my law within their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people. . . . All, from least to greatest shall know me, for I will forgive their evil-doing and remember their sin no more.” Our Jewish brothers and sisters revere this as a statement of the covenant between them and God.

What God hints at here and in other places in the prophets is a new relationship of love and intimacy between God and the people, a relationship that must be mirrored among the people themselves. All of us and all creation will be intimate with God. It’s God’s dream for this world and everything in it. It is God’s original intention in creating. It is the kingdom, a mystery that is coming closer and closer, moving toward fulfillment in Jesus, in history, in the Spirit, in all of us.

How will all this happen? The Letter to the Hebrews gives us some indications: first of all the Son of God has assumed our human nature, like us in all things but sin. Then, as we heard a little while ago, Jesus offered prayers and supplications to God with loud cries and tears. And the author reminds us that “Son though he was he learned obedience from what he suffered and when he was made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who obey him.”

Can this not be our attitude also for the rest of this Lenten season? Can we identify with crying out with tears, prayers and supplications in

reverence and obedience to God? After all we too must learn to listen, to put into practice what God has commanded, to offer ourselves as a sacrifice in worship.

A closer look at the Gospel may give us a good idea of how that happens.

It's Passover and many people are coming to the temple, including some Greeks, that is, foreigners, Gentiles, presumably pagans. They approach Philip and say, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." Now remember that in John seeing Jesus means believing in him, and believing in him means possessing eternal life – already, right now. They want to see Jesus, to believe in him. Philip goes to Andrew. Andrew goes to Jesus. Jesus goes to the Greeks. It's almost like a child's game of connecting the dots: these lifelines that hook people together, pulling them into a circle of friendship, of discipleship, of intimacy. It's a pattern, a way of life for those of us who call ourselves Christians, part of the company of Jesus. We need each other to see Jesus, to be saved. Jesus comes to us through others, through the lifelines, through other members of the community. But it's just as true that, conversely, we bring others to Jesus.

When Jesus speaks to those Greeks he tells them that the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified, but then he goes on to describe that glorification with a very striking image: "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit." He is talking about himself. But he is talking about us as well. Indeed he says we have to die in order to live. Now he doesn't mean the end of our earthly life. He is talking about every day. If we would serve Jesus and preserve our lives then we must follow him to the cross, to foot-washing, that is service of one another, and there where his servant is, Jesus is found. We are journeying in the company of Jesus and there are others trying to get to Jesus through us, just as the Greeks came to Philip and then to Andrew and finally to Jesus. Whom are we bringing to Jesus? And how in our life of service are we dying in order to live? How is the grain of our lives falling into the ground? Who needs our service now? A soup kitchen? An AIDS hospice? A single parent in your child's school? Your own children who demand and need so much of your time and energy? A teen seeking support and a sense of identity? A son or daughter caring for an elderly and invalid parent? Older folks who would love to go

to church next week but are afraid to go out or to drive? Are we the servants of the Lord willing to help others bear their burdens and to walk with them on their way to Calvary? That's the way of the cross.

I began this homily by mentioning some of the problems our society is facing. My own conviction is that if we really took our Christianity seriously many of those problems would be solved. Imagine what it would be like if we really tried to live the parable of the Last Judgment: helping the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the imprisoned. Imagine what it would be like if we all really tried to live the beatitudes, truly poor in spirit, genuine peacemakers. The problem of course is that these ideals seem so foreign to the world we live in. Genuine Christianity will always be counter-cultural. But that too is the way of Jesus and again it's our way of the cross.

This is what the church proposes for our prayer and meditation in this Lenten season. Jesus talked about his hour. Well, this is our hour, the hour we come together in communion with others to pray and to prepare for Holy Week and Easter, and to live so as to invite others into the presence of Jesus. We need to share with those we love and with those with whom we worship how we have learned obedience through suffering, how we have learned to lay down our lives for one another.

This is our faith. This is our hope. And this is our comfort: that Jesus suffered, prayed, obeyed, and died that we might live and die in God. Jeremiah's prophecy of hope was fulfilled in Jesus and remains true for us today: "I will be their God and they shall be my people and I will never leave them, no matter what!"