

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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THE LIGHT WE NEED

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 21, 2021

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 51:1-13

HEBREWS 5:5-10 | JOHN 12:20-33

I was with my friend giving out lunch to our neighbors this week on the street, our “cousins” as we like to say. He recognized an old friend in the line, and after he left with his bag, he said to me: “You know Father, growing up, when we were in high school, I used to invite him over to my back yard and we would get high. I’m always glad to see him alive, but every time I see him I have to pray a pray of repentance, because I know that what I did helped him on his path to addiction, and I feel partly responsible. Somehow, I got free. But he couldn’t. Lord have mercy. I wish I could change that. That will always be on my conscience.”

I listened this week to more discussions on climate change and what we need to do now. I'm often tempted to tune out. I think, what can I do, what little thing would make a difference? We get stuck because we are all complicit. We all play a part. We are all responsible.

I hear the news of another mass shooting. The reports and commentary unfold about a mentally unstable white male who killed nine Asian women. The victims are all of one race, but also of one gender. What was the motive? Was it racism or misogyny? Is the crime a hate crime? One way or another, I suppose, yes. But it is more.

It is a story about a young man who misunderstood his own religion, who was not taught to respect the dignity of every human being, who most probably hated himself. This Christian has lost his way. He has wandered from staying close to Jesus.

It is a story, if we understand it, that should create a moral panic in us, because it reveals something broken, twisted, evil in all of us. Not a Twitter panic. The panic that rises when we see this young man is blind, and driving toward us. The panic of a community without good answers. Perhaps the real discussion is about why his religious faith failed him and even became part of the excuse for him to kill.

Our gospel opens today with a haunting request: "We would see Jesus." We who hear the story, see Jesus give his last public teaching. It comes at the moment of the greatest moral panic among the crowds. The gentiles are present, Jesus' enemies are taking sides, Jesus himself declares: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

At times like these, at times of great moral panic, at times when we seemed overwhelmed by the trial we are going through in this pandemic, in the chaos around us, we must stay close to Jesus. He reminds us how we come to a light bright enough for us to see by. We must be obedient to the law of love. And that means we will suffer the violence of those who have lost their way. And it means that we must confront our own sin, confess it, and pray for a new heart and a right spirit for ourselves.

And for everyone.

Consider my first story. Consider what my friend did with his life. He got free. He drew near to Jesus. He learned how to pray these verses of Psalm 51 with his eyes wide open:

“Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, *
and my sin is ever before me.”

So now he follows more closely to Jesus. He serves. And he is reminded that while he is forgiven, he must always find a way to respond to the world's trauma, pain, and sin, in love, with sacrifice, denying himself and thinking of what blesses others.

Consider what we should do about this planet earth that God has given us. We should not throw up our hands, give up, or give in. We must change how we live, one act, one day at a time. We are all complicit. We should change the car we drive, the stove and lights we use. We need to leave aside apathy and seek understanding.

When the prophet Jeremiah foresaw a time when we would all instinctively have the Law of God written in our hearts, he was quite literally at the bottom of a well. He had watched one king of Israel go into exile and his successor, the last king, killed. He was kidnapped and taken into custody in Egypt. He would never see home again. The whole religious system, all of society, was shattered, crushed.

And so his faith responded. There will come a time. There will have to come a time, when God will write his law on our hearts. We will not be stuck in our moral panic. There is no future in remaining stuck in our moral panic. “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

Do you see it? Everything depends upon our willingness to identify, confess and confront our sin and how it makes us all responsible.

That work is what lies beneath the power and beauty of Psalm 51.

For behold, you look for truth deep within me, *
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.

Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; *
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem with a royal welcome. Everyone had come. The crowds were expectant. The Greeks came and said: “We would see Jesus.” Jesus spoke to the crowds one last time. You will need a particular kind of light to see me clearly.

Stays close, get down on your knees, and look up. And pray:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.

Write your law, O Lord, on my heart.

And with eyes focused on him, we will see what happens as he is both brought down and lifted up. He will be glorified.

And in that light, the light we need, we will hear his call and our path at his side – to change, to suffer, and forgiven, serve.