



BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Jeremiah 31:31-24; Psalm 51 [50]; Hebrew 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified

John 12:20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Even from a cursory reading, two distinct parts can be observed: (i) what discipleship involves, vv.20-26 and (ii) a teaching connecting discipleship with the destiny of the Messiah, vv.27-33. There is also a hint of both the Transfiguration (“voice from heaven”) and Gethsemane (“take away this cup”).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The lifting up language reminds us the

bronze serpent in the desert at Num 21:9. There it carries the loaded meaning that the cure for the disease is confrontation with the disease itself. This is often true physically and psychologically. Metaphorically, the cure for the human “disease” of death will be the death of the Son of Man, so that we might live.

KIND OF WRITING

John 12 is an extremely important point of arrival and departure in this Gospel, forming a kind of hinge between the Book of Signs (1-12) and the Book of Glory (13-21).

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Part One: Philip and Andrew have a higher profile in this Gospel (John 1:40, 43-46, 48; 6:5, 7-8; 12:21-22; 14:8-9) and the mention of them recalls the call narratives in the John. Just as in those stories, one person brings another to Jesus (Jn 1:29-51). In the following verses, the language at the beginning and the end (vv. 23-24 and v.26) is Johannine, but the language in the middle (v. 25) comes from the Synoptic gospel tradition: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35-36).

Part Two: Both Gethsemane and Mount Tabor seem to be in the background here. The agony in the garden is not part of the Johannine portrait of Jesus, but it is echoed here: “He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want’” (Mark 14:36-37). There are two big differences: the prayer does not take place after the supper or in the Garden (Kedron has a different function in this Gospel) and, secondly, the prayer is dismissed immediately as if the thought were only a slip of some kind. A voice from heaven could recall either the Baptism (a voice from heaven is part of that tradition) or the

Thought for the day

It has sometimes been remarked, in lighter vein, that none of us gets out of here alive. It is simply part of the human condition that we are aware of death and feel the threat of ultimate absurdity. How shall we confront it? Denial—often lived with frenetic distraction—is no help. Christian faith, in contrast with all other faiths, has a distinctive claim: in Jesus’ death, God reached out to us in tender and vulnerable love, becoming our companion on the way. Both John 12 and Hebrews 5 affirm that. It is astonishing to the point of being almost incredible.

Prayer

Great and loving God, we are surrounded by mystery—the mystery of ourselves, of death, of creation, of you. You are our companion on the way and we place our hands confidently in your outstretched hand.

Transfiguration (a voice for others, as well as the context of the cross and resurrection). In this Gospel, the writer is really describing all the time the Risen Lord, under the guise of past description, and in that scheme of things, there is no place for a further transfiguration. However, the tradition is echoed here and brings to light a moment of affirmation, which also looks forward to the resurrection through the death of the Messiah.

ST PAUL

“But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the

earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable” (1Corinthians 15:35-43)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 20 The festival = Passover. Why would Greeks go to worship? Probably we are meant to think of the “god-fearers”, i.e. Gentiles attracted to Judaism. Greeks are elsewhere mentioned at 7:35. The Greek language is mentioned at the crucifixion.

Verse 21 This is very like the call stories in John 1.

Verse 22 At the start too, the disciples went from one to another.

Verse 23 This is a kind of thematic statement, which is unfolded in the enigmatic phrases that follow. Both terms—hour and glorified—are rich in meaning in this Gospel. The hour is the moment/event of salvation, the lifting up of the Son of Man, through death into resurrection. The glorification means that this event will make apparent the true nature—glory—of God.

Verse 24 The farming metaphor takes up material from the Synoptic tradition (e.g. Mark 4) and amplifies it. Metaphorically, it explored the meaning of the hour and the glorification: the death of the Son of Man will bear much fruit.

Verse 25 The argument is taken a step further. This time it is presented in the form of a maxim, but a highly paradoxical maxim, taken from the Synoptic tradition again. This confirms the significance of the death of the Son of Man, while at the same time making a bridge with the experience of discipleship.

Verse 26 This very makes it further explicit that discipleship (serving me) involves following Jesus through the cross into resurrection. The reward will be to “be with” Jesus. The final phrase is also paradoxical: the one who serves (i.e. lowering him/herself like a slave) will be

honoured by no less a figure than God himself. Honour here means sharing in the glory of Jesus.

Verse 27 The opening phrase is reminds us immediately of Gethsemane, with the difference that in this Gospel Jesus does not go to the garden to prayer. A rhetorical question is asked. In the context of acceptance of death only one “answer” is possible.

Verse 28 Glorify your name in this context means carry through the destiny of the Son of Man, and in that way God may show us his true identity (glory). The voice from heaven is not heard at the baptism in John; here it may be an echo (not more than that) of the Transfiguration in the Johannine tradition.

Verse 29 Others sense something has happened.

Verse 30 Not for mine = because I don’t need the affirmation / clarification.

Verse 31 Judgment is called crisis in the Greek, i.e. a critical event causing choice. The phrase about the ruler of the world anticipates the victory of Jesus over evil in the lifting up.

Verse 32 The image here is a direct echo of “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:14-16)

Verse 33 This makes it plain that the lifting up has two senses. At a metaphorical level, Jesus will make the journey through death into resurrection, i.e. be lifted up into the transcendence of God. At a physical level, this will happen through being nailed high on a cross.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus seems to sense that a crisis point has arrived, and he agonises over saying ‘yes’ to what lies before him. He opts to stay faithful to the mission given him by

God. Can you recall decisions over which you agonised? What was that like for you? What was it like when you made a decision that you dreaded, or were anxious about, but believed it was the right one for you?

2. The parable of the grain of wheat reminds us of a truth that any parent can testify to, namely that it is in dying to ourselves that we can give life to others. We will never be of benefit to others if we remain wrapped up in ourselves. In what ways has your dying to yourself brought life to another? How has the generous giving of another brought life to you?

3. Sometimes our emotions rebel at the thought of what lies ahead and we feel like praying Father, save me from this hour. Then a realisation may come for you as a parent, a teacher, a spouse, a friend: No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Recall times when you have accepted pain or hassle and been a source of life to others for doing so.

4. The story presents the death of Jesus as the moment of his glorification by God. It is the moment when the love of Jesus for us is shown in its greatest depth in his gift of himself, a gift he was able to make because God enabled him to do it. We are also glorified when the grace of God enables us to give generously of ourselves. When have you experienced this in yourself or in another?

PRAYER

In our hearts, O God, you have written a covenant of grace, sealed by the obedience of Jesus your Son. Raise us up with Christ, the grain fallen to earth that yields a harvest of everlasting life. Bring us to glorify your name by following faithfully where he has led. For you we wait; for you we listen.

We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, our deliverance and hope, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Genesis 9:8-15	Noah	Ps 25 (24)	1 Peter 3:18-22	Mark 1:12-15
Lent 2	Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 14-18	Abraham	Ps (116) 115	Rom 8:31-34	Mark 9:2-10
Lent 3	Exodus 20:1-17	Moses	Ps (19) 18	1 Cor 1:22-25	John 2:13-25
Lent 4	2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23	Exile	Ps 137 (136)	Eph 2:4-10	John 3:14-21
Lent 5	Jeremiah 31:31-34	New Covenant	Ps 51 (50)	Heb 5:7-9	John 12:20-33

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered

Heb 5:7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In his new *Introduction to the New Testament*, Eugene Boring comments in lapidary fashion on “St Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews”: it is not by St Paul, it is not a letter and it is not to the Hebrews. What are we to make of this fascinating, difficult and brilliant New Testament document?

Because Hebrews was used by 1 Clement (95-96 AD), it must have been written before then. Often people think it was one response to the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. So, a document from the last thirty years of the first Christian century. Note that the information about the Temple in the sermon does not seem to come from the building of Herod the Great but from the Pentateuch, also suggesting a later date.

The anonymous author has penned a document written in the very best Greek of the New Testament. He was highly educated and deeply familiar with the teaching and thought patterns of Middle Platonism. He knows rabbinic traditions of exegesis and is an excellent rhetorician. His Platonism affects his account of the heavenly sanctuary, mirrored by the earthly one.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

He is writing to a community of Christians (not Jews), of both Jewish and Gentile background. They are undergoing some kind of harassment as believers and stand in need of encouragement. There is a dispute about the origin and destination of the letter, because the one reference is ambiguous: *Greetings to all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with you all.* (Heb 13:24–25)

On balance, it would see that the letter was written to Roman Christians by a teacher from the community, writing home from abroad.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole document is a homily, interweaving doctrinal passages and moral exhortations.

1:1-4 Introductory faith statements
1:5-2:18 The Son and the angels
2:1-5:10 Christ as High Priest
5:11-6:20 Toward the difficult topic
7:1-10:39 Christ’s priestly ministry
11:1-12:17 Call to love and faithfulness
12:18-13:19 Closing exhortations
13:20-25 Blessing and greeting

The sermon offers us a priestly understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are accustomed to thinking of Jesus as a priest, especially in the context of the Eucharist. At the time, however, and in the context of Jesus’ ministry, this was quite a stretch. Firstly, Jesus himself was a layman, not being from a priestly tribe. Secondly, Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist and he took from his mentor a hostile attitude to the Temple.

Our passage has a certain hymnic quality echoing the pater in Phil 2: pre-existence, humiliation, exaltation.

RELATED PASSAGES

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise shared in their humanity, so that through death he could destroy the one who holds the power of death (that is, the devil), and set free those who were held in slavery all their lives by their fear of death. For surely his concern is not for angels, but he is concerned for Abraham’s descendants. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people. For since he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:14–18)

Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold

fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathising with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 The writer already noted that Jesus was the Son of God; now he underlines the humanity of Jesus, as an essential condition for his being an effective High Priest. The echo of Gethsemane (and John 12) is combined with priestly action (supplication). “From death” has two intended meanings: to avoid that fate and to be saved through it.

Verse 8 This is key sentiment in Hebrews. Jesus was a priest not by *separation from* humanity but by *communion with* us all. His sacrifice is not an exterior one of blood but the interior one of a heart open to God. Cf. Heb 10:8-9.

Verse 9 Perfect means (i) in contrast to the OT priesthood which had to be repeated; (ii) Jesus opened the way to the sanctuary in heaven; (iii) Jesus was perfected through identification with humanity in suffering.

Verse 10 Why Melchizedek? Because symbolically, the Levites through their ancestor Abraham had honoured Melchizedek, thereby making his priesthood superior. He was also of mysterious original and unknown destiny, thus matching the story of Jesus.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is often the case that we can help people because we have been through something similar ourselves. Can you remember any instances in your life?

3. Has it ever been your experience that some suffering brings unexpected grace?

2. Jesus can help us because he is like us. Has this ever been the case for you?

PRAYER

Now may the God of peace who by the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, equip you with every good thing to do his will, working in us what is pleasing before him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20–21)

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts

Jer 31:31 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.

32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For the fourth Sunday of Lent, we had a summary of the Exile experience from 2 Chronicles. There were different reactions to that devastating event. It fell to Jeremiah to proclaim it and to undergo it, to interpret it and give hope. Often, Jeremiah laments and blames. However, from time to time, he opens the door to hope and looks forward to a future restoration of the people, purified after the punishment of the Exile in Babylon.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Jeremiah is not a straightforward read, on account of the mixture of material and the lack of a single narrative across the book. That said, a (very) broad outline may help:

Jer 1-25: chiefly, poetic oracles and prose sermons

Jer 26-45: most of the material is “biographical”; an exception would be chapters 30-31, which are concerned about hope for the people’s future. Jer 30:1-31:40 is sometimes called The Book of Comfort.

Jer 46-51 A collection of oracles against the traditional enemies of Judah.

KIND OF WRITING

It is, as usual, an oracle combining prose and poetry. Verse 33 shows the use of

parallelism, with the subtle indication of movement in the repetition.

33 I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; *i.e. in contrast to writing on stone.* and I will be their God, and they shall be my people; *i.e. this time, they will be faithful.*

This section of the book comes to close with three prose oracles, each beginning with the same expression:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. (Jeremiah 31:27) 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. (Jeremiah 31:31) The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. (Jeremiah 31:38)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts, O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn with no one to quench it, because of the evil of your doings. (Jeremiah 4:4)

The sin of Judah is engraved with an iron chisel on their stone-hard hearts. It is inscribed with a diamond point on the horns of their altars. (Jeremiah 17:1)

I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. (Jeremiah 24:7; cf. 32:39-41)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 31 The days are coming is a typical expression so Jeremiah (Jer 7:32; 9:25; 16:14; 19:6; 23:5, 7; 30:3; 31:27, 31, 38; 33:14; 51:47). The new covenant in its historical context meant the restoration of Israel after the Exile and included the reconstruction of the Temple. The covenant was new in its interiority. New covenant is explicitly invoked by Paul: *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone*

but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2Corinthians 3:2–6)

Verse 32 Even in negative formulation, the text conjures up the events of salvation which underlay the covenant on Mount Sinai. There was nothing wrong with the Mosaic covenant—except that the people, the bride of YHWH, were unfaithful to her/their husband. The brief mention of husband reminds us of the deep vein of nuptial imagery for God’s relationship with Israel.

Verse 31 The word “make” translates the original “cut”, because a covenant was cut between allies (cf. Gen 17:7-21). The language of “writing” implies a contrast with the stone tablets. Also cf. Jer 17:1 above! These were somehow “external”, whereas the new covenant will be marked by being interiorised, written in their hearts. Cf. the citations from Jeremiah and Ezekiel under D above. NB “heart” is singular in Hebrew, meaning the corporate intentionality of the people is in view.

Verse 34 Because the Torah will be given to each directly and spiritually, there will be no need for teachers (! cf. *As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you* [1John 2:27]).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The boundless love of God is made real in his desire always, always to forgive and draw us back into the circle of his love. When has such an experience been “real” for me? Prayer of contrition and praise.

2. The journey inwards is the journey home, precisely because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26–27). Prayer of “yes” to the indwelling Spirit of God.

PRAYER

God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, pour your Spirit of love into our hearts, that we may truly know you and feel the help and hope we have in you.

May we become temples of the Holy Spirit in name and in fact.

READINGS 1 AND 3

THE LITURGY

Jeremiah 31:31-24; Psalm 51 [50]; Hebrew 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

The ingathering of Israel is a theme found in the prophet Jeremiah, in the preaching of Jesus and also in the Fourth Gospel. The last line of the Gospel today echoes the theme, but it is found elsewhere:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34)

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. (John 11:49–52)

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The briefest glance at the psalm will tell you how fitting it is. The editors of the lectionary have selected just the right verses to pick up the message of the first reading.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Jeremiah 31:31-34

What is God like? Here’s a great passage from Isaiah in which we hear a deeply reassuring word of God. This is what God is like: endless compassion, endless

forgiveness, love without end.

Second Reading

Hebrew 5:7-9

Was Jesus really like us? Here’s a passage, echoing the prayer in Gethsemane, which shows him struggling with God’s will. Because he is like us, he can help us.

Gospel

John 12:20-33

Some Greeks wish to see Jesus. His reception seems to be almost a warning: are you sure you want to be a follower because there are consequences?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 23 March

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62

This story of innocence vindicated anticipates the Gospel account of sin forgiven.

Tuesday 24 March

Numbers 21:4-9

We know from our human experience that when something is harming us, we need to face it. Something of that ordinary experience lies beyond this extraordinary story. The image of the serpent lifted up is found on the lips of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, speaking of his own death and resurrection.

Wednesday 25 March *The Annunciation*

Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10

Every child is a blessing, a sign of God-with-us. The birth of Jesus confirms this human experience and assures us that God is with us in the Word made Flesh.

Thursday 26 March

Gen 17:3-9

The reading today picks out an emblematic story about Abraham, as a preparation for the Gospel, where Abraham is mentioned again. He was the original man of faith, our father in faith, as Hebrews puts it, who put his trust in God and in a way God puts his trust in Abraham.

Friday 27 March

Jeremiah 20:10-13

Right up to today, good people are made to suffer when they tell the truth and say it like it is. This was true also in the past: Jeremiah suffered greatly for his convictions and prophecies, in the same way as Jesus would much later.

Saturday 28 March

Ezekiel 37:21-28

This short reading was written a time of national disaster and disgrace. As we listen, we might keep in mind what picture of God comes out of this picture? Can it help me or us today?

REFLECTIONS

The great Lenten review of the Old Testament (Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Exile) comes to a close with a deeply positive response from God to the people of Israel and to us today. *Whatever* happens, *no matter* what happens, God is faithful. Implied in the passage is the inner journey, a journey to authentic spirituality, so that we learn to live from the centre outwards. In a word, the journey inward is the journey home.

The classic Psalm 51 (50) follows through with a selection of verses underlining inner conversion, inner conviction of spirit. This openness to God prepares us for the description of Jesus from Hebrews as a man of prayer and as a man of obedience to God. Jesus’ response to God made him the source of eternal salvation. The very same teaching comes through in the remarkable words of Jn 12, “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself.” The readings for the fifth Sunday of Lent are therefore full of hope. The root of this hope, this “happiness in believing”, lies not in a complacent optimism nor in a complacent optimism, but rather in the really good “Good News” of Jesus Christ.

The hunger of the human heart leads us to undertake the journey inwards, but on the journey we encounter Christ, “an event, a person which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Benedict XVI).