

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Jer 31; Ps 51; Heb 5; Jn 12

This Sunday's readings contain important theological teachings. The first reading from Jeremiah speaks about the "New Covenant," from where we get "New Testament." What is this "New Covenant"? The Old Covenant was made in Sinai, but it was broken, as the first reading states. Moses had even broken the tablets of this "pact" as a symbol of its being broken, from the very beginning, Ex 32:19.

The prophet Jeremiah foretold a time when a New Covenant, different from the first, would be made between God and his people. It would not be written on stone tablets, but in the heart of flesh. God's people would really be able to keep this covenant, and so it would be eternal, everlasting. About the same time as Jeremiah, another prophet, Ezekiel, spoke in similar terms: God would wash the repentant people, suffering but learning life's lessons while in exile. God would give them a new heart, would take out their heart of stone and give them an obedient, supple, heart of flesh (Ez 36:24-29). He would make an eternal covenant, and finally and definitively dwell among them, Ez 37:26-28.

A real conversion (one of the main purposes of Lent) was necessary. One of the great images for this conversion is the "circumcised heart;" see Dt 30:6; Jr 4:4; Phil 3:3; Col 2:9-13. The psalmist —traditionally this is David's psalm after his sin with Bathsheba— prays for a clean heart, purified with hyssop, Ps 51:9. This plant was used for purification rites in the Old Testament (Lv 14:4; Nm 19:18), but it was also used to sprinkle the doorposts with blood during the Passover in Ex 12:22. John's gospel says that what was used to give Jesus vinegar on the cross was not a reed (as in Mk 15:36), but a hyssop, as if to remind us that Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29, 36) is also the Passover lamb (Ex 12:3-5, 21; cf. 1 Cor 5:7) and the Suffering Servant (Is 53:7). It is by contemplating the mystery of Jesus on the cross and hearing the proclamation of his passion, death and resurrection, that we are "pierced to the heart" (Acts 2:37) and experience conversion, and have our hearts purified by faith, Acts 15:8-9.

Jesus offered himself up for us as a grain of wheat dies in order to give fruit. This was a costly sacrifice for him, requiring great generosity (Albert Vanhoye). In some way, his own heart was painfully circumcised, *for us*. But being “lifted up from the earth,” he draws everyone to himself, and to where he is with the Father.