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A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings
APRIL 2006

April 2, 2006	April 9, 2006	April 16, 2006		April 23, 2006	April 30, 2006
Jeremiah 31:31-34	Mark 11:1-11 or	Isaiah 50:4-9a	Isaiah 25:6-9	Acts 4:32-35	Acts 3:12-19
Psalms 51:1-12	John 12:12-16	Acts 10:34-43	Psalms 31:9-16	Psalms 133	Psalms 4
or Psalms 119:9-16	Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29	or I Corinthians 15:1-11	Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24	I John 1:1-2:2	I John 3:1-7
Hebrews 5:5-10		or Acts 10:34-43	Philippians 2:5-11	John 20:19-31	Luke 24:36b-48
John 12:20-33		John 20:1-18	Mark 14:1-15:47		
		or Mark 16:1-8	or Mark 15:1-39, (40-47)		

In the March readings, we looked at some of the scriptural development of what it means to say that we are called to be God's covenant people. In the April readings, we come face to face with the unique role that Jesus plays in our covenant relationship with God, above all else in his passion, death and resurrection. To claim that Jesus plays a unique role in our relationship with God—in other words, that Jesus is uniquely important to our salvation—is simply another way of affirming that we are Christians.

Traditionally, Christians have expressed the uniqueness of Jesus by calling him the Son of God and fully identifying his life with God's will. In this sense, everything Jesus experienced was necessary. The liberal tendency to dismiss the crucifixion as a tragic but irrelevant end to Jesus' earthly ministry is wrong, as is the conservative tendency to dismiss Jesus' earthly ministry as killing time before doing his "real" work on the Cross. In Hebrews 5, the author engages the question of how Jesus could *grow* without needing to *improve*: "It doesn't mean he was 'imperfect' before in the sense of being sinful, but that he needed to attain the full stature of sonship through experiencing the pain and grief of the father over his world gone wrong. He became truly and fully what in his nature he already was."¹ The same question is engaged in John 12:20-33, where Jesus prays that God's name be glorified in the suffering he was about to experience: "The appropriateness of Jesus' prayer is confirmed by the voice from heaven. The past, present and future of God's self-revelation are brought together."²

How can we know that God's self-revelation here is complete? The nation of Israel faced the same uncertainty under the judgment of the prophets, as in Jeremiah 31: "If Israel's sins in the past brought such fearful judgment upon the nation so that it came close to total annihilation, what assurance can there be that after a future restoration has taken place the same fate will not befall Israel again? The theologically conceived response to this is that God will, by the very creative power of his love, write the law of the covenant upon the hearts of the men and women who make up Israel...there will be an inner power and motivation towards obedience on the part of Israel."³ (This assurance is echoed fully in Psalm 51 and partially in Psalm 119). For Christians—the majority of whom are Gentiles who have been grafted onto the tree of Israel, adopted into God's family—this creative power has been definitively expressed in Jesus, and it is the continued presence of Jesus in our lives that provides an inner power and motivation. In other words, we recognize Jesus as our Lord, as did the people of Jerusalem in Mark 11: "You don't spread cloaks on the road...for a friend, or even a respected senior member of your family. You do it for royalty. And you don't cut branches off trees, or foliage from the fields, to wave in the streets just because you feel somewhat elated; you do it because you are welcoming a king."⁴ The royal welcome of Psalm 118 has been lived out.

The story of Jesus' triumphal entry in John 12:12-16 evokes a different and somewhat disquieting facet of his lordship: "Jesus comes as the presence of God among them, but not as the conquering hero."⁵ If Jesus is not a conquering hero, where is the comfort in his lordship? Where do we find hope? In Isaiah 50, the prophet sets the criteria for what news of the kingdom of God must contain: "The only word that can instill hope is the one that cuts through the dread inflicted by ruthless oppressors by exposing their wickedness and cruelty to the justice and compassion of the power that will prevail."⁶ Indeed, Paul affirms in Philippians 2 that "a Christ who could fully redeem would have to triumph over these powers, setting free those who all their lives had been in subjection."⁷ Only then can the

vision of Isaiah 25 come to pass: “The poet is speaking of a complete reversal of God’s activity and intention for the nations in the past, an intention that led to their utter annihilation. In the age that is to come, death will be replaced with life, sorrow with joy, as at a feast of unimaginable proportions.”⁸ As a conquering hero, Jesus would have kept Israel on the way that leads to death, however more just and kind a ruler he would have been; death cannot be tamed, but must be undone.

Now that we know the *ends* of what Jesus came to set in motion, there remains the question of the *means*. In this respect, we find ourselves in roughly the same position as the disciples, who in Mark 14-15 have consistently failed to understand Jesus’ words up to and including the Last Supper, which we as Christians commemorate in the sacrament of communion: “Jesus has, for some time now, been trying to teach the disciples about his forthcoming death...He has given a few words of explanation and interpretation, in terms of biblical background (the **son of man**, the servant), political meaning (turning worldly notions of rulership on their heads), and theological interpretation (giving his life a ransom for many). All of that lies behind this meal, but the meal itself goes far beyond theory. To the annoyance of our rationalistic age, you can’t put this meaning into words. You can only put it into action.”⁹ What is that action? To accept that Jesus has removed all barriers to God’s kingdom, so that we have nothing left to do but to enter in: “We are not called to repeat his unique moment of suffering; he went through that alone on behalf of us all.”¹⁰ The total suffering of Psalm 31 has been lived out as well—and its prayer for deliverance from that suffering has been answered.

Although we are not asked to share in Jesus’ suffering, we are invited to share in the triumph of his resurrection (echoing Psalm 118), because it is the resurrected Jesus who is always with us, as we see in Mark 16 and John 20:1-18: “No one has taken Jesus away; he has left death behind...The promised transformation from weeping and pain to joy has been accomplished through the word and presence of Jesus.”¹¹ Although we *remember* the historical suffering of Jesus when we celebrate

communion, we *experience* the contemporary living Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15, “Paul wants to be clear that the resurrection is rock-bottom reality for the Christian...the only point in being a Christian at all is if this message continues to be the solid ground on which you stand.”¹² Our covenant relationship with God hinges on the promise of the resurrection, as we see in the inclusive message of Acts 10: “Because Jesus has ascended to reign with the Creator of all people, in the resurrection-ascension both redemption and creation are linked in Jesus Christ. A vision of the Lordship of Christ...is the basis for Christian efforts at inclusiveness. One cannot have a Lord who is Lord of only part of creation. So in any nation any one who fears him and does what is right ‘is acceptable to him.’”¹³

Christians live under the universal lordship of Christ, and in this way Jesus uniquely brings us into the fullness of covenantal life. As we see in 1 John 1-2, we are not only reconciled with God, but with our neighbors, so that we may live in service to each other: “Jesus is the bringer of eschatological life, the life that is final but without end, the life of God’s new age...Fellowship may be understood as communion, participation, or partnership.”¹⁴ This message echoes the gospels (as well as Psalm 133), as in John 20:19-31, where “the gift of the Spirit is presented as that which empowers the community to continue Jesus’ work...The forgiveness of sins must be understood as the Spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus’ work in the world.”¹⁵ In other words, we are freed to respond to each other not on the basis of what our actions might deserve, but on the basis of our equal dignity and worth as children of God. We no longer have to make decisions based on questions of cost and benefit—not only in a figurative sense, but literally, as we see in the common life of the early church reported in Acts 4: “Luke was not a Marxist, but he was enough of a realist to know that there is a good chance that where our possessions are our hearts will be also.”¹⁶

This freedom can empower us to do great things. But we must always remember, as Peter proclaims in Acts 3, that our work in the Spirit is only possible through Jesus' name, not through any power of our own. (Our dependence of God is also eloquently presented in Psalm 4). As the writer in 1 John 3 notes, "Sin is a condition...from which humanity needs to be freed by the work of Christ. Once freed from sin, the believer should—indeed, must—live for God and remain free from sin."¹⁷ After all, as we see in Luke 24, "The experience of the presence of the risen Lord led the disciples to see that he had been raised, and the experience of the individual believer and the community of believers is still the foundation of faith...the movement from proofs to commissioning is natural."¹⁸ Without Jesus, we would not fully understand what it means to be God's covenant people, nor could we even begin to hope to fully live into that relationship. Alleluia! Christ is risen indeed!

¹ N. T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 49.

² Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 712.

³ R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, c1988), 190.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 147.

⁵ O'Day, 708.

⁶ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1995), 141.

⁷ Craddock, 41.

⁸ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1993), 190.

⁹ Wright, *Mark*, 194.

¹⁰ Wright, *Mark*, 200.

¹¹ O'Day, 841-842.

¹² N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 204.

¹³ William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1988), 98.

¹⁴ D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1991), 37.

¹⁵ O'Day, 846-847.

¹⁶ Willimon, 52.

¹⁷ Smith, 82.

¹⁸ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 490.