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Thursday's Gospel: Who is Jesus?

Gospel for Thursday in the 5th
Week of Lent, and commentary.

Gospel (*Jn* 8:51-59)

Truly, truly, I say to you, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death.”

The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets; and you say, ‘If any one keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?”

Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is your God. But you have not known him; I know him. If I said, I do not know him, I should be a liar like you; but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad.”

The Jews then said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.

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Commentary

We are drawing close to Holy Week. In the words of our Lord that Saint John records for us in this passage, we see a harsh contrast between Jesus' message and the worldly understanding of the Jews he is speaking with.

Our Lord is speaking about his relationship with the Father and his intimate knowledge of Him. He does so in such strong terms that he even applies to himself the words "I am," which the book of Exodus uses for God himself (cf. *Ex* 3:13-14).

Saint John thus reveals to us once again that Jesus is more than just a man: he is the incarnation of the true God of Israel. Hence Jesus can affirm with certainty that whoever keeps his word will not see death (cf. v. 51) and that before Abraham was born "he already is" (cf. v. 58).

The people listening to him are scandalized when Jesus claims that

anyone who keeps his words will never die. They know that only God can make such a statement, and they accuse Jesus of being possessed by a demon. Even the greatest figures of the Chosen People had died, including Abraham and the prophets, and therefore they had no reason to believe that Jesus would suffer a different fate or that he could conquer death with his word.

When Jesus responds by appropriating to himself the divine words “I am,” they see no other option than to put into practice what the book of Leviticus commanded: “He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him” (*Lev* 24:16). But Jesus knows that his time has not yet come and he eludes their grasp.

We see today how Jesus asks us to acknowledge that he is God

incarnate, and to abandon ourselves trustingly to his Word of Life. This complete trust in our heart can only arise if we answer correctly the question the Jews here address to him: “Who do you claim to be”?

This answer is ultimately what our faith is all about: recognizing that Jesus’ true identity is that of the Son of God who has become man for us.

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