

Fourth Sunday of Lent March 11, 2018

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

God's love is universal and at the same time it is personal. Our God is concerned of each person individually yet at the same time he loves us as a community. We exist in and through him and particularly so because he is the God who loved the world so much to send his own Son to gather us together that we may have new life in him. God also sends us to carry his divine love into the world and give the message of the newness of life and light. We are children of the light baptized into the glory that is Christ. We are initiated into the life of Christ who is the light of the world. Once baptized in Christ we become his new creation, the members of God's own family. Today as we enter the fourth Sunday of Lent we are called upon to renew ourselves and experience the loving invitation of our Lord. In the early church those candidates to be baptized and public sinners were called upon to understand that Jesus alone is the new life. In the first reading, the house of David seems to have come to an end. Because of their infidelity the people have suffered. But God's plan of salvation continues to move forward. In the second reading Paul overwhelms us with the message of God's mercy. When we were dead through our sins, he brought us back to life in Christ. The Father has done everything for us in Jesus. In the Gospel Jesus the giver of new life, tells us of the love of God for humanity that he sacrificed his own Son. Jesus declares that he must be lifted up on a cross to glorify God and bring salvation to the world.

In the Book of Chronicles the author concentrates on the ideal picture, especially the spiritual accomplishments of King David and his successors. The book itself is a summary of the history of God's chosen people. The reading declares that early and often God sent messengers to the people. Had they listened to God's prophets and changed their hearts the kingdom could have been spared. They had provoked his wrath and God allowed their own enemies to purify and cleanse them. The author wants readers to appreciate how forbearing and compassionate God has been in giving the people every opportunity to repent of their sins. What they did not realize is that God was working in their lives and this fact they ought to believe. The terrible events described in the central verses took place in the year of Babylonian captivity. The Babylonian army destroyed the city and also destroyed Solomon's Temple. Thus began the Babylonian exile for the people of Israel. The author quotes Prophet Jeremiah about the land retrieving the lost Sabbaths meaning the neglect of the worship of God over a period of seventy

years. But the passage concludes on the upswing. The enlightened reign of Cyrus the founder of the Persian Empire, leads to a decree announcing the building of a second temple in Jerusalem. The decree even includes a blessing for the people.

In the Second Reading of today Paul explains to the Ephesians community that God is rich in mercy. While mankind was dead through its trespasses by walking in the darkness of the worldly ways, he gave it a new life through Christ. Through his grace, those who believe in him have been saved. God continuously showers his grace upon his people to show them his compassion. He knows that without Christ, there is no hope. Humans are helpless and if we are saved by the grace of God, it is not by our own doing. There is nothing that we can do to secure our salvation. God the Father is the initiator of everything to do with our salvation. He is the God rich in mercy, full of kindness and love. The life of Christ becomes our life. Those who were dead in transgressions and experienced spiritual death by rejecting the grace of God, they will inherit eternal damnation. Eternal life in the beatific vision of God can only come to us by the grace of God. To inherit God's gift of salvation we need the gift of the grace of God, faith in Jesus Christ and the Sacrament of Baptism. We are raised up with him and are made one in Jesus. God is giving us the free gift of salvation in his eternal Kingdom. It is because we have been created through Jesus to do good works by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is because we have been called to shine in the fruit of the Holy Spirit as holy children who are worthy of the grace of God.

In today's Gospel John gives us the nocturnal conversation which Jesus had with a leading Jew, a man of wealth and position. This man whose name was Nicodemus had been impressed by the preaching and miracles of Jesus but was afraid of fellow Jews in whose circle he moved. He was a man of good will but as is often the case with the intellectuals he was not able to make up his mind. So he came to Jesus to speak to him at night. Nicodemus was told that to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, a man must believe in Christ and be baptized. He has to be born anew of the spirit of baptism. Jesus also told him that that it is God's will that he himself should be lifted up on the cross so that those who believe in him may have eternal life. We do not know how Nicodemus understood Jesus. Certainly he had great respect for him. We see him defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin when the Pharisees were condemning him. He assisted Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus and supplied expensive aloes and myrrh for the embalming of his body. It is in his conversation with Jesus that we discover the fund of the doctrine of God's love

towards humanity. Surprisingly there is no mention of him in the early Christian community. However, with John giving him such importance in the gospel, he must have been a key member of the early group.

In the Gospel passage we have the words of Jesus telling Nicodemus, that 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. In this Biblical passage, Jesus was referring to an event that occurred in the days of the Old Testament. In the days of Moses, the people of God had lost their patience and spoke against God and Moses and constantly complained against them. They asked why they were brought out of the land of Egypt to die in the wilderness. They grumbled that there was no food or water, and they detested the miserable food they got namely the Mannah. To punish the ungrateful people for having spoken against him, God sent poisonous snakes. Many Israelites were bitten by the snakes and died. When the people repented and acknowledged that they had wrongly spoken against the Lord God and Moses, they asked Moses to pray to the Lord to take away the poisonous serpents. Following this, God instructed Moses to make a metal snake and to put it on a pole so that anyone who was bitten could look at it. Whoever would look at the figure of the serpent would not die from the snake bite. This event was prophetic in nature. It represented what was to come in the days of the ministry of Jesus on earth. John applies this action of Moses in the desert to Jesus being lifted up on the cross. The metal snake was an image of Christ was a sign and symbol of God. As the metal snake was raised and put on the pole, Jesus was also raised and nailed to the Holy Cross. It is God's saving action for humanity.

Jesus used the story as a parable of himself. He told Nicodemus that for the salvation of the world he himself would be lifted up. He meant this in a twofold sense: lifted up on the cross and lifted up into glory by his resurrection and his ascension. The suffering and joy signified by these two images are essentially connected. If there is no cross then there is no crown of joy and if there is no pain and suffering then no entry into glory. Jesus tells us today as he told his visitor that if we look at Jesus and believe in him then he will give us eternal life. The eternal life that Jesus gives us is not the duration of life but the quality of life. That is the highest life possible which is life with God himself living in us. It surrounds us and infuses every aspect of our life with peace, peace with people because we are God's children, peace with life itself because we live in a friendly universe and peace with ourselves because of a new insight into and humble acceptance of our weaknesses. Jesus sums this up by saying that God

so loved the world that he gave his only Son for us human persons. His whole essence is love and he loves the entire world itself.

It is important to know that for John the crucifixion of Jesus is his exaltation. That is why the crucifixion is the high point of the Gospel. In fact for John crucifixion, resurrection and ascension are all one continuous act. There is also a parabolic reversal in all this: what appears to be the greatest humiliation of Jesus, his crucifixion, is in fact his greatest glory, his exaltation. The whole purpose of Jesus being lifted up on the cross is to demonstrate that those who believe in him might have eternal life. By the phrase eternal life John does not mean the endless endurance of human existence. Eternal life is life lived in the unending presence of God. One does not have to wait until some unknown future to have this desired life. It can begin in the here and now for those who have faith in Jesus. This life is defined by God and not by humans. St Augustine tells us that God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love. That shows the depth of his love for humanity.

In the next passage of the Gospel Jesus summarizes the saving action of God in the incarnation and the motivation for that action. Jesus says that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. The passage tells us what is known as the most profound summary of God's love that God loved the world so much that he gave his only son for our sake that we may have life in him. It is personal and most profound gift because it is God's Son who is given to the world. This gift in effect begins God's judgment of the world. However, that judgment will be the result of the choices made by the people. Those who accept and believe in Jesus will be saved and those who do not will perish. John portrays Jesus as the light that came into darkness. It is not a loving God who condemns; rather people choose to alienate themselves from his love. John says that all those who do wrong deliberately hate the light and choose darkness. A person who lives by truth and integrity is not afraid of the light. Such a person has nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. Some people condemn themselves by turning away from the light. However it is still the people who must choose to live in the light or to remain in darkness. Jesus is the Light. He is the only way. He is the only Truth. He is the only Life. There are none other but Jesus who can save us by the grace of the Heavenly Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. All of this is a matter of faith. Through our living faith in Christ, we have the assurance of salvation.

During this time of Lent, let us review our hearts to determine where we stand. Are we walking in the Light of God or are we walking in the darkness? Are we walking partially in the Light and partially in the darkness? Our eternal life and salvation depends entirely on our living faith that calls us to look up to Jesus on the Holy Cross. Our salvation and eternal happiness require that we give ourselves entirely to Christ, having both feet in the Light. God has compassion on his people and does not want any of us to be lost. If we have not been completely faithful to the Light of Christ or if we have not properly moved along our spiritual journey, let us sincerely repent and look for forgiveness. He is the giver of light and he will give it to us whenever we ask for this light. John says that all those who do wrong deliberately hate the light and choose darkness. A person who lives by truth and integrity is not afraid of the light. Such a person has nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. Our frequenting of the sacraments during the Lenten season will help us to sincerely follow God's love in our life. As we approach close to the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the Living Bread, we ask the grace so that we may have the inner joy and peace of Christ in our hearts. But as the Second Reading reminds us today, all our goodness is God's gift to us and is nothing for us to boast about. Our goodness, such as it is, is his goodness shining through us. As the readings tell us that God's love has no limit and he is full of compassion on his people.

A little wave was bobbing along in the ocean, having a grand old time. He's enjoying the wind and the fresh air until he notices the other waves in front of him, crashing against the shore. "My God, this is terrible," the wave says. "Look what's going to happen to me!" Then along comes another wave. It sees the first wave, looking grim, and it says to him, "Why do you look so sad?" The first wave says, "You don't understand! We're all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn't this terrible?" The second wave says, "No, YOU don't understand. You're not a wave; you're part of the ocean."

A man found a cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared; he sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could go no farther. Then the man decided to help the butterfly, so he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in

time. Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly. What this man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were nature's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon. Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life. If nature allowed us to go through our life without any obstacles, it would cripple us. We would not be as strong as what we could have been. And we could never fly.

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