

## **Fourth Sunday of Lent B/2009**

Our God is a master of history. He acts through the happenings and the events of human history for the good of those he loves. His love is so great and his mercy so big that he is ever ready to intervene in human history and to put an end to the misery of his people. That is the point of today's readings in this fourth Sunday of Lent.

The first reading of Chronicles recalls what happened once to the people of Israel in the course of their history. In that time, all the people abandoned the ways of the Lord and lived in infidelity. They desecrated the temple and polluted the nation with sin.

In spite of God sending them his messengers and prophets to warn them and to bring them back, they continued in sinning. As the anger of the Lord inflamed against them, their enemies destroyed their country and the temple, and took them captive to Babylon. The Israelites became slaves and servants of the powerful king of the Chaldeans.

However, despite all that, God continued to love his people and to care for them. As proof of his care, God raised Cyrus, the king of Persia, to set Israel free from the Babylonian slavery, to bring them to their land and to rebuild the temple.

This episode of the life of Israel teaches two things. First. The Jews in exile symbolize the people all over the world who are alienated from God because of their sin. However, it is only those who are aware of their alienation and are longing for liberation, reconciliation, peace and salvation, who can be saved. Lent is precisely a propitious time for that reconciliation with God, with the members of our family and the people who have hurt us.

Second. The fact of liberating the Israelites from slavery in spite of their sin shows that the most prevailing characteristics of our God are love, compassion and mercy. The period of Lent is a time of experiencing that compassion and mercy of God in the sacrament of confession. As St Paul says in the second reading, God is rich in mercy because of the great love and kindness he has shown us in Jesus Christ. Even when we were dead in our transgressions, he brought us to life with Christ; he raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens.

We do not save ourselves; we are saved in Jesus. Therefore, salvation is not our doing; it is God's gift we should accept in faith. We have to rekindle that faith in Jesus Christ by seeking with our whole heart to live the kind of life which will bring joy to God's heart.

With the time of Lent, the Church invites to fast, pray and do the works of charity. We should never forget that it is not these works that save us, but our disposition of heart that inspires them in the name of Jesus. In that perspective, all our works should above all be the consequence of our purification in Jesus Christ. Any fast, prayer and almsgiving that is not preceded by the purification of the heart is irrelevant before the Lord. This is why our conversion of heart in this time of Lent is important.

By referring to the episode of the bronze serpent by means of which the Jews were saved in the desert, the Gospel wants first of all to warn us against the consequence of sins. It wants also to invite us to appreciate God's love for us in the sending of Jesus in the world as our savior.

In fact, it was when the Israelites murmured against God and regretted having left Egypt that God punished them with the fiery serpent. Once they repented, he saved them through the use of the bronze serpent that Moses fabricated. In the same way, those who look at Jesus crucified on the cross and accept him will be also saved and have their eternal salvation. We have to believe in Jesus as the crucified Lord.

The death of Jesus on the cross is a grace that God has granted us for our salvation. His being lifted up on the cross is the fulfillment of our eternal life; but it is at the same time the beginning of his own glorification. That is why his being lifted up on the cross and his being lifted in glory are the same thing. The same is true for us: there is no glory without cross. We have to bear our cross in the footsteps of Jesus in order to share in his glory.

John tells us that, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might have eternal life. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God".

Whatever might be our personal situation, God offers us always, in his son Jesus, the possibility of change and conversion, because he wants us to be saved. One of the implications of such a statement is that salvation comes only to those who have the courage to change their lives and not those who are stubborn and live permanently in their sinful situation.

This is a matter of choice, courage and determination. In that sense, it is not God who condemns us. We condemn ourselves when we make bad choices that exclude Jesus from the circle of our life; when we do not take God and his word as the guiding principles of our lives. This is true today as it has been in the past. We are responsible for our death or our eternal life. We are accountable for everything that happens in our relationship with the Lord, be it death or salvation. We cannot deny this responsibility.

Human history is repeatedly the same with its long range of missed opportunities, stubbornness of heart and lack of openness to God's grace. And yet, God's mercy is always within our reach. His door is always open to those who want to do something and come back to him. What better and more wonderful season to do it than Lent! Will we consent to do it now! Will we listen to this plea of the heart! May Lent help us to respond positively to God's love shown in Jesus Christ! God bless you all!

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



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