

### **Fourth Sunday of Lent B/2012**

The readings of this fourth Sunday of Lent talk about the saving power of God. That saving power has been fully manifested in the sending of Jesus into the world and in his death on the cross for our salvation.

In the first reading, the book of Chronicles recalls the liberation of the people of Israel from Babylon. At that time, the people who were in exile grew in the awareness that the cause of all the misery that happened to them was their sins.

They remembered how in his compassion, God sent them messengers and prophets in order to warn them, but they did not care. Not only did they mock them, but they also scoffed at them. As a consequence, they were invaded by enemies who killed many and destroyed their country and the temple. Those who escaped the sword were carried prisoners and slaves into captivity.

However, in spite of their sins, God did not abandon them. In his mercy and compassion, he raised Cyrus, the king of Persia, to set them free and to allow the people to go back to their homeland and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is the master of history who can turn the events of human history for the good of those he loves. Another idea is that God is so merciful that he continually forgives the sins of his people by showing them his love.

As St Paul says in the second reading, God is rich in mercy, because of the great love he has for us. Because of that love, while we were dead in our transgressions and sins, he brought us to life through his son, Jesus Christ.

All that helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as it insists on God's love shown to us in the sending of Jesus in the world. First of all, the Gospel relates the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In that conversation Jesus recalls an old event of a serpent of bronze through which the people of Israel were saved during their journey in the desert.

For Jesus, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. It is for that reason that he declares that God did not send his son into the world in order to condemn it, but in order to save it through him.

If, then, there is condemnation, it is for those who do not believe in him. That is why he compares himself to a light that came into the world in order to make everything clear. But, instead of accepting it, people preferred to live in darkness. Those who preferred darkness to light did so because they were not only evil, but also they did wicked things. On the contrary, whoever lives in the truth does not fear the light, because all his works are clearly seen as done in God.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the grandeur of God's love and the paradox of the cross. When John says that God loved so the world that he gave us his son, he is inviting us to acknowledge the grandeur of God's love for us. In fact, human experience has taught us that when someone loves, for instance like a parent, he/she gives everything he/she is and has to his/her children. It means also

that he/she is able to accept the sacrifice the love of his/her beloved ones imposes on him/her.

That is exactly what God has done by sending Jesus in the world. He loved us so much that he did not hesitate to send his only begotten son into the world. Jesus, in turn, loved so much that he gave us everything, and ultimately his own life on the cross for our salvation.

In that perspective, the death of Jesus on the cross, so bitter it might be, becomes the ultimate proof of God's love to the world. The cross itself becomes a grace through which we experience God's love. Then, we understand why Jesus says that as Moses lifted up the serpent, he will be lifted up on the cross in order to give life to those who believe in him.

The second thing we learn is about the importance of accountability. When Jesus says that whoever believes in him is not condemned and whoever does not believe is already condemned, he is inviting us to the accountability of our faith.

In fact, our perdition and our salvation depend entirely on us and on our attitude towards Jesus. In that sense, it is not Jesus who condemns us, because the Father did not send him into the world in order to condemn it, but so that it might be saved. On the contrary, we condemn ourselves when we exclude Jesus from our life and when we do not make his word the guiding principle of our lives.

That is why we are responsible for our death and our eternal life. What we do in order to belong to Jesus and fulfill his words in our lives plays a big role in determining our destiny. There is, on the part of God, a real desire that we might be saved, but he cannot save us without our consent. What we do in response to God's desire counts a lot for our future. A good choice leads to salvation while a bad choice leads to perdition.

The last thing I want to highlight is about the symbolism of light and darkness. In this short periscope, Jesus uses the word "light" five times as opposed to darkness. Light defines the kingdom of God and of Christ as that of goodness and justice. Darkness describes the domain of Satan as one of evil and ungodliness. In that sense, two destinies await each one of us, namely happiness and misery.

Therefore, when Jesus uses these words, he wants us to realize that there is a real drama which goes on around us so that there is a continual confrontation between light and darkness. If we choose the way of light, we opt for life; if we choose the way of darkness, we opt for death. And yet, he has come in order to give life. That is why we have to opt for him so that we may live eternally. He has come to enlighten our eyes of his divine presence so that we share one day in his resurrection. That is the challenge we face in this time of Lent. May God give us the courage to reject darkness and choose Jesus! May God bless you all!

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



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