

Gratitude Foundation



*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

The Fourth Sunday of Lent—Year B

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“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”

(1 Thess: 5:18)

Fourth Sunday of Lent - Year B

Reading I

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the LORD's temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem. Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy. Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah: "Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled." In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!"

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

R. (6ab) Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the streams of Babylon
we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

On the aspens of that land
we hung up our harps.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

For there our captors asked of us
the lyrics of our songs,
And our despoilers urged us to be joyous:
“Sing for us the songs of Zion!”

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

How could we sing a song of the LORD
in a foreign land?

If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand be forgotten!

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

May my tongue cleave to my palate
if I remember you not,
If I place not Jerusalem
ahead of my joy.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

Reading II

Ephesians 2:4-10

Brothers and sisters:
God, who is rich in mercy,
because of the great love he had for us,
even when we were dead in our transgressions,
brought us to life with Christ — by grace you have been saved —,
raised us up with him,
and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,
that in the ages to come
He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace
in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;
it is not from works, so no one may boast.
For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works
that God has prepared in advance,
that we should live in them.

Verse Before the Gospel

John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.

Gospel

John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus:
“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”
For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might not perish
but might have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.
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.
And this is the verdict,
that the light came into the world,
but people preferred darkness to light,
because their works were evil.
For everyone who does wicked things hates the light
and does not come toward the light,
so that his works might not be exposed.
But whoever lives the truth comes to the light,
so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Exegesis

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

In typical fashion the Israelites seek answers to why bad things happen to them, the chosen people. They equate their infidelity to God and His prophets as the reason for their misfortune of the Babylonian Exile. They also recognize the hand of God in their newfound freedom. The saving act of God that sets them free after 70 years is for us one of two predominant paradigms for salvation in Sacred Scripture. The first of course is the Exodus experience. Both of these events mark the beginning of a journey, a long and arduous journey to the Promised Land. God's powerful hand sets them free, and God is with them on the journey.

Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

During this 70-year period of Exile, despite being scattered all over the Middle East, something held the Israelites together. It was the Word of God and their common faith. Our psalmist today bemoans that challenging time of exile and captivity. As generations revolve their faith remains constant. The yearning for homeland is passed on to children and children's children. Now a new generation returns to rebuild what once was.

Ephesians 2:4-10

Ephesians articulates what theology has come to call *The Primacy of Grace*. St. John explains in his First Letter, *In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loves us and sent His only Son as expiation for our sins.* (1 Jn 4:10) The author of Ephesians speaks of the same primacy of love and mercy such that even in our transgressions we are brought to life in and through Christ. With Pauline vocabulary, i.e., *grace, faith, works, boasting*; but with a shift in emphasis from Paul's description of justification by faith apart from works of the law – Ephesians speaks of salvation as the result of God's gift alone. The dichotomy is no longer faith vs. works (Rom 3:28) but God's grace vs. human good deeds.¹

1. New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy, P.H, page 887.

Exegesis (Continued)

John 3:14-21

Jesus recalls the story of the Fiery Serpents from the 21st Chapter of Numbers. As a response to the grumbling of the people God sent Seraph or Fiery Serpents that were biting the people, and they were dying from its poison. The people asked Moses to pray to God to take away the serpents. Moses did but God did not take away the serpents. Instead He provided the antidote for those who had faith. Moses was instructed to hang a replica bronze serpent on a pole. Those who gazed upon the bronze serpent would be saved from the poison. He did not take away the snakes nor did he stop them from biting, but He took away the sting of death for those who believed. Thus salvation became a gift that required a response, a personal choice and an ascent of faith. Death is still with us, but to those of faith, death no longer has the last word.

John 3:16 reminds us that salvation is both gift and response and so faith is both gift and response. Why did Jesus include the word *only* as in *only* Son? Why did He not simply say, *God gave His Son*? It reminds us that God gives us His all. The gift of God's all begs a response of our all. A gift is not a gift until it is received. We must accept the gift. With that gift comes an illumination of the heart and mind. St. Augustine called this divine illumination. It is the gift dimension of faith. Faith is one of the three theological virtues as God is the source. Faith also, because of the gift of free-will, requires a personal response.

The Light has come into the world, but people preferred darkness to light. This is a true yet troubling statement by Jesus. It is an indictment of our fallen human nature. The Light of Christ illuminates the darkness of our lives and that can be a little challenging and even painful. The spiritual life is a journey into ever brighter light. Along that journey as we get closer to the Light we continue to see new things that we did not see before. We see areas of darkness and sin that need purging.

Reflection

This weekend, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, we celebrate what is called Laetare (la-tar-ae) Sunday. The word means “Rejoice” and is taken from the Latin translation of Isaiah 66:10: “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in her joy.” Our first reading this weekend from the Book of Chronicles and our Psalm recall the time of exile in Babylon and the joy of being set free to return to Jerusalem. This Sunday we pause to rejoice in the gift of Salvation.

For most of my life I have looked at the stories of salvation, the Exodus experience where the people are set free from slavery in Egypt, the freeing of the people from captivity in Babylon, and the Passion of Jesus where we are set free from the bondage of sin and death, all as being set free from something, i.e. slavery and bondage, sin and death. I now look at the paradigms of salvation more in the light of being set free for something. The Israelites were set free from the chains of slavery in Egypt to begin a journey through the desert to the Promised Land. The people were set free from bondage in Babylon to begin a journey back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and their lives. By the Cross of Jesus we are being set free from the grip of sin and death to begin a journey through the “desert” of this life to the Promised Land that we call Heaven. And so we REJOICE! The joy must be found in the journey.

In our first reading this Sunday the people are being set free by King Cyrus with the express charge to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple of God. They are being set free for a purpose. We too have been set free to build up the Kingdom of God here on earth. We have been set free to accomplish the mission entrusted to us by Jesus, the mission to be a channel of His love pouring upon the world.

Our Gospel this weekend is centered on the famous passage John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that those who believe in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.” I always looked at that as the gift of the birth of Jesus into our world and the gift of Jesus on the Cross of Calvary. I looked back to the events of 2,000 years ago. I was once told by a respected scripture scholar that a very plausible translation for this famous Gospel passage might go like this: “For God so loves the world, that He gives His only begotten Son, so that those who believe in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.” He said that he felt that the tense of the verb is active and ongoing. The gift of God’s love and life is an ongoing, ever-present, never-ending reality.

As we move toward the Altar this weekend at Mass, think about that ongoing gift of God’s only Son. We come to the altar to receive the gift of God’s only Son, Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity. God wants to continue to pour His love and His life upon the world in and through us. As we become what we receive, the Body of Christ, we are to become channels of God’s love and God’s life in our world, in our families and in our environments, where we live and move and have our being. We have been set free from the bondage of sin and death for this mission entrusted to us by Jesus Himself! It is both an incredible gift and an awesome responsibility!

And so we pray, come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love. Amen.

In Christ,



Personal Witness

John 3:16 is the most well-known and quoted verses in all of Sacred Scripture. In some ways it sums up the Gospels and the entirety of Sacred Scripture. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...* This is the quotation that you see on signs and holy cards. After seeing this quotation published so often I thought that this was John 3:16. John 3:16 does not end there, however, there is a comma. *...so that everyone who believe in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.* Only in its entirety does the verse encapsulate all of Scripture. It is about God's gift, the primacy of Grace, and our response to that gift.

I grew up in a small tight-knit farming community. Everyone was Catholic and belonged to the local country parish. One of our neighbors left the Catholic Church and became evangelical. Shortly thereafter a huge billboard appeared on their barn. It was the first half of John 3:16. The beginning of that verse always prompts me to complete the sentence in my head, *so that those who believe in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.* In John's Gospel faith equals eternal life. John would later sum up his Gospel as follows: *But these things are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.* (Jn 20:21). So, the question is, what does it mean to believe? Is it a creed that we recite at Mass? Is it a system of convictions that we hold in our hearts?

As I was contemplating my neighbors who left the Catholic Church, I was wondering what prompted them to leave. How can we say we believe in Jesus and not seem to believe in what He said and taught? How can we say that we believe in the words of Jesus as quoted in the third chapter of John and not believe in His words captured three chapters later in John 6? What about those poignant words to St. Peter on the rock of Cesareo Philippi, *Peter you are Rock and upon this Rock I will build My Church?*

As I reflect on what it means to believe as revealed to us in Sacred Scripture it occurs to me that real faith is much more than a creed or a system of convictions that we adhere to, it is about a relationship with a person, and that person is Jesus. It is about a deep personal relationship that involves a deep abiding love and an indwelling presence. Recall in John Chapter 3 that Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus and He tells him that he must be born from above, i.e. born of the Spirit. At the Last Supper Jesus again spoke of this indwelling Spirit. Belief is about opening ourselves to the Spirit and remaining connected to the Spirit. It is the Spirit that gives life. Jesus says that those who believe might have eternal life. He is speaking of a present reality, something that we grasp in the here and now. And because God is the source of that life, that life is eternal.

In Christ,

