

4th SUNDAY OF LENT (Cycle B)

March 26, 2006 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – (Mar. 26) – regular Year B Readings

Focus on the second reading, Ephesians. We will contrast the roles of faith and works in the dialectic of our salvation. Works are expected, but as the result of not the source of salvation. Many older Catholics continue to “depend” on their piety and works of service. We need to help them understand a biblical point of view. But, Scripture, especially Matthew and James, understand that “faith without works” is empty verbalism.

INTRODUCTION

Prayer, fasting and alms-giving are the call words for this Season of Lent. We have been called to follow the tradition of our church community and join with Christians throughout the world. For what purpose? Why do we pray, fast and offer works of charity and generosity? Our Ash Wednesday readings reminded us that the attitude behind our actions is as important than the outside action. So why do we do all these special things during this season.

For some background, let us review the scriptures. They remind us that God has been trying for thousands of years to get our attention. Through messengers, miracles, healings, and proclamations, God has been trying to convince us that the love that is offered us is eternal, sufficient and a gift. Do our Lenten actions reflect that belief or are we still trying to earn our way into God's heart? Do our attitudes reflect what God has been trying to convince us of? Has God gotten our attention yet?

A style of Christianity that trumpets perfection and strength will not sell. It is not the real Good News. We can all grit our teeth and use our willpower for a while, but in the end we know that we are not perfect and we are not always strong. We know that any "real" gospel must include our weakness and our sinfulness. The only true, lasting and eternal conversion of heart

that happens in us human beings comes through love not coercion or threat.

The gospel of today calls us to believe and be saved. Our Lenten Season is a time to check to see if we are still believing in and proclaiming in our lives, that the Good News is real and has set us free. There is a strong line in the gospel that can teach us the power of love. The gospel writers says, "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, so that his works might not be exposed." No matter what the sin, none of us likes to have the light shone on us in the midst of our sin. We would rather work it out in the dark and come out when we have everything put together well. We love to appear to have our act together and living the "perfect" life. We shun the light because many of us experience the shame of those who would judge us because of our sins. No wonder we stay in the darkness rather than be shamed by the light. The love that has been offered to us by God for thousands of years invites us into the light, even with our sins, so that we can see God's face again and remember that "nothing can separate us from the love of God."

In light of the gospel, we are called to examine our attitude toward ourselves and others. As our lives shine light out to others, as we give our example for the world, what kind of light do we shine? Do we shine a light that shames others because of the things that they do? Do we dare to have the "sinner" step up and admit what they have been or are doing? Do we make room in our own lives for our own weakness and sin?

The light we have to offer is that same light that God offers to us through Jesus. It is the light that he offered the woman caught in adultery, the light offered to Peter and Judas after their betrayal of Jesus, the light offered to Bartimeus as he came down from the tree, and the same light that was offered to those who nailed him to the cross.

The one we lift up is a light for the whole world. It is a light of freedom and not of shame. Our acts of prayer, fasting and alms-giving are a light of hope offered to a hungry and thirsty world.

Today we celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Lent is a forty day season of fasting, abstinence and penance. It is a season that is stricter, in this sense, than the rest of the year. But it is precisely the austerity that typifies Lent that is interrupted today as the Church celebrates "Laetare" Sunday.

“Laetare” is a Latin word that means “Rejoice.” And it is the first word of the Entrance Antiphon of the Holy Mass that we celebrate today.

This Sunday is more joyful than the rest of the Sundays of Lent because we are celebrating the fact that we are half way along our yearly pilgrimage to Easter Sunday. But, in reality, good Christians should always feel joyful, even when they are fasting or doing acts of penance. “The joy of Our Lord is our strength. Go in Peace.” That is one of the ways that the dismissal at the end of Mass can be phrased. In these two sentences the true meaning of our faith is summarized and underlined. The joy that we feel as we recognize that we are faithful followers of the Lord, the joy in recognizing that the Lord wants us to be happy, should strengthen us during the rest of the week. It should give us the strength we need to carry the crosses that will come up during our daily life.

Today, as I said, the Church celebrates the joy of knowing that we have reached the beginning of the last few weeks of Lent. To celebrate this event, the Church allows us to place flowers on the altar, something that is not allowed during the rest of the Lenten Season. The priest and the deacon dress in rose colored vestments, a color that signifies joy better than violet colored vestments, the normal color for Lent. In this way we do what our Lord always asks us to do, even through the days of penance, we don’t allow sadness and sorrow to rule our lives. We radiate happiness.

A good Christian should show to the world the light received in the Holy Mass. The light should shine in him or her so brightly that they should be the image of Christ for others. In a Christian like this we see the happiness that surges out into the world from a pure heart, from a person who does not fear the Light of Christ, who tries by every means possible to ensure that the light received is transformed into good works that show his or her love for God.

Lent, even though it is a time for austerity, is also a time for authenticity. We know that there are many people in this world who will try to lure us away from our faith. Frequently, we have to make sacrifices when we are tempted to exchange our love of God for love of earthly things such as illicit pleasure, ill-gained success or power. These days of Lent place before us a dilemma We have to choose between the light and darkness, between good and evil, between love of God and love of those earthly things that separate us from the true road to Christ. If we choose good, if we decide to follow

Jesus, sacrificing those other things, we will win out in the long run. We will realize that all of those other things only end up separating us from God and doing us harm. Without a doubt, when we change our lives and choose the good, we become better persons. It could even be possible that when we show others, through our good works, that we live a joyful and pure life completely dedicated to doing good that we will influence family members and maybe even the rest of the community to do the same.

READINGS

Reading I

2 Chr 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

Ps 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

Eph 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.

Gospel

Jn 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.