

4th SUNDAY OF LENT (Cycle B)
March 21-22, 2009 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

[Spring Break joke]

A girl from the University of Alabama was enjoying Spring Break on the Florida Gulf Coast when she saw a couple of cute guys walk by on the beach. She said (in her best Alabama accent),

“Hey, where do y’all go to school?”

One of them replied,

“Yale.”

She shouted, “HEY! WHERE DO Y’ALL GO TO SCHOOL?!?!?”

Well, that has nothing to do with the homily. Or maybe it does. Students (and maybe some adults too) go on “spring break” to rejoice at being out of school for a few days.

This is the Fourth Sunday of Lent. It’s called Laetare Sunday. “Laetare” is a Latin word that means “Rejoice.” This Sunday, we’re more or less at the mid-point of Lent. Today, we lift the veil of penitence just a little and rejoice. Kind of like a “spring break” from Lent.

Laetare Sunday is an ancient tradition. Back in 1216, Pope Innocent III gave a sermon that explains it:

"On this Sunday, which marks the middle of Lent, a measure of consoling relaxation is provided, so that the faithful may not break down under the severe strain of Lenten fast but

may continue to bear the restrictions with a refreshed and easier heart."

Maybe the strain of Lent is not so severe any more. I doubt that any of us are in danger of breaking down under the strain. We smear a little ashes on our foreheads, abstain from eating meat for a few days, maybe eat a little less, maybe give up something, or do something extra, if it's not too much trouble. I gave up Rye whiskey and Cuban cigars again this year.

Still, sometimes we need a break, a little joy to help us get back down to business – like students on Spring Break. In a way, we're celebrating the fact that we are half way along our annual pilgrimage to Easter Sunday. But tomorrow it's back to business.

And what is our business, the business of Lent? We'll get to that in a minute.

If we really listen to the first reading, we may be struck by how much we are like the princes and priests of Israel. We add infidelity to infidelity. We reject those sent by God to bring His message to us.

Now, Israel was conquered and destroyed for that. It took a foreign prince to begin the restoration of Israel – Cyrus, the Persian king, not one of the chosen people. Cyrus was the one who began to lift their chastisement.

Does God chastise his people any more? Maybe we're really not worth the trouble any more. The Israelites could see it played out in their history. Although we can't say we don't deserve it, we may not have that luxury.

In today's world, contempt for God's plan may not lead to collective calamity any more. It may not even lead to personal catastrophe in any visible public sense – the worst of sinners sometimes seem to our eyes to be doing just fine. But sin leads to disaster nonetheless, whether our own empty and vacuous culture acknowledges it or not.

Israel's rejection of God's plan led to national degradation and humiliation. Ours leads to an even worse disaster – a death worse than death itself – the loss of eternal life.

We are saved by the mercy and kindness of God. Not by works, but by the grace of God.

Mark Twain was no theologian, but I think he put it pretty well. He used different words – instead of grace, he used "favour" – instead of works, he said "merit" – but here's what he said:

"Heaven goes by favour. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in." (Mark Twain, 1835-1910)

We are already saved by the grace of God. Now, that doesn't mean we are predestined, and that we can do whatever we feel like doing. It doesn't mean we should be smug and self-satisfied that we are "saved." If we proclaim our own perfection and righteousness, if we try to present ourselves as really being the "good Christians" we ought to be, that's not what the Gospel is about. Any "real" gospel must include admitting our weakness and our sinfulness.

At the same time, we should always be aware that we are here for a reason. Part of that reason is the good we can do, the good that is there to be done, the good we have a responsibility to do.

We all have a purpose in life. But we may never know what that purpose is. For a long time, I worried about that. What is my purpose in life? How will I know when I've done it? After that, do I get to relax, or just go to heaven, or what? What happens when I've done it, whatever "it" is? I finally realized that I'm never going to know that in this life. I can only trust that God will tell me in the next life, and hope I did it, whatever "it" was.

Today's Gospel also talks about light and darkness. We have a responsibility to turn away from the darkness. A good Christian should show the light to the world, the light should shine in him (or her), the image of Christ for others.

Today's Gospel also makes reference to the snake lifted up by Moses as a symbol of relief from the suffering of snakebite. Our symbol is the cross. The cross is our symbol, the symbol of relief from our suffering, the symbol of the suffering of Jesus for us. Our journey to Easter must inevitably take us past Calvary.

The Israelites looked at the snake as an antidote for the poison of snakebite. Prayer is our antidote for the poison of selfishness and sin. Personal prayer, family prayer, community prayer – there are plenty of opportunities for it. That's part of the "business" of Lent.

Why do we pray, follow the minimal rules of fast and abstinence, try to do good works during Lent, any more than at any other time? God has been trying for thousands of years to get our attention. Through messengers, miracles, healings, proclamations. What's so special about Lent?

The special season of Lent gives us one more opportunity to reflect on our own sinfulness and examine our hearts. Do our Lenten actions reflect our faith, or are we still trying to earn our way into God's heart? The attitude behind our actions is at least as important than the outward action. Do our attitudes reflect what God has been trying to convince us of? Has God gotten our attention yet?

So, I hope you had a good Spring Break. Have a good Laetare Sunday, and be joyful today. We should always feel joyful, even when we're fasting or doing penance. "The joy of Our Lord is our strength. Go in Peace."

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.