

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT-MARCH 14, 2021

READINGS: 2 Chronicles 36: 14-17a, 19-23;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 137;

Ephesians 2: 4-10;

Gospel of John 3: 14-21

Lent: Reawakening Our Faith

Today, our Lenten journey brings us to the Fourth Sunday of Lent. This Sunday is referred to as *Laetare* Sunday or Rejoice Sunday. As part of our celebration of this Rejoice Sunday, the rule of restricting flowers may be relaxed for us to put a couple of beautiful flowers around the altar. The priest's vestments for Mass are rose-coloured. We might be wondering what makes the Fourth Sunday so special? Why is this Sunday known as Rejoice Sunday? What are we rejoicing about? The Church has provided us with three readings inviting us to reflect on the spiritual significance of *Laetare* Sunday on our Lenten journey.

We begin with the first reading from the Second Book of Chronicles. The Second Book of Chronicles was written after the Babylonian exile (587BC-537BC), to encourage the returned exiles to be faithful to God. The writer began today's passage by reminding the people that their lack of faithfulness to God was the reason the exile happened in the first place. The passage describes how things had gone from bad to worse: the Israelites and their leaders including the priests had continued to be unfaithful and immoral. God sent his prophets to warn them but the people ignored the messengers "until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy". The Lord brought disaster upon his people: the Chaldeans, the enemies of the Israelites besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The Chaldeans killed many Israelites and took the remaining to Babylon in exile. Then, as though out of nowhere, God used a foreign nation, King Cyrus of Persia and his people to send the Israelites home to rebuild their city and the Temple. After conquering the Chaldeans, King Cyrus declared in a written edict: "That says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem which is in Judah". In his compassion and love, God gave his people another chance at life in their own land in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah. This second chance that God gave the Israelites can be described as a gift from God to his people so that they would turn their lives around.

The first reading about the Babylonian exile leads us to the Gospel passage from John. Today's passage is about Nicodemus, a devout Jew whose story appears only in the Gospel of John. Before today's passage we read that Nicodemus had come to see Jesus at night. His caution in coming to see Jesus at night implies heavy opposition to Jesus in Jerusalem. Probably, Nicodemus didn't want to be seen by his fellow Jews. Jesus and Nicodemus had a conversation about the kingdom of God. Jesus told Nicodemus, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above". Jesus used metaphorical language to talk about spiritual rebirth but

Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus' meaning. The conversation continued when Jesus referred to himself as the "Son of Man". Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man". In the Gospels, Jesus is usually referred to as the "Son of Man". The expression the "Son of Man" refers to a triumphant figure coming with the clouds of heaven as described in the Book of Daniel, Chapter 7.

Today's passage picks up the story about the "Son of Man". Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus centered around an image of a bronze serpent on a pole. This is a reference to a story that appears in the Book of Numbers (21: 7-9). During the Israelites' journey through the desert, they had become disobedient and unfaithful to God. God sent poisonous serpents to attack the people. Some of the people died. The people came to Moses to acknowledge their sins against God and asked Moses to intercede on their behalf. God ordered Moses to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole. Anyone bitten by a serpent and looked at the serpent on the pole was cured of the bite of the serpent.

Today's passage begins with Jesus telling Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up". The expression "lift up" has a double meaning. The meaning that Nicodemus would assume is a physical lifting up to be seen. The meaning of the expression "lift up" is a meaning that is true both for the bronze serpent and for Jesus-- Jesus being lifted up on the cross. The second meaning of the expression "lift up" is "to exalt"-- to indicate that the cross is also the manifestation of God's glory and majesty by the resurrection of Jesus from the death and his ascension into heaven. We can see that Jesus used the image of the serpent on a pole as a parable about himself.

In today's passage we read what is considered by Biblical scholars to be one of the most quoted verses in the Bible. Jesus told Nicodemus, "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". The word "believe" means to come to know and to accept the truth and the truth in the context of the passage is that Jesus is divine-- the Son of God. The word "believe" has the same meaning as word translated "faith". The word "love" in the verse is the saving love of God or divine love. The expression "eternal life" stresses not only the duration of life, but the quality, that is, the highest quality of life possible. The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus reveals that Jesus, the Son of Man has come to save the world and not to condemn it. However, those who chose not to believe brought condemnation upon themselves. The Evangelist wrote his Gospel at the time when his audience was facing persecution. He used his unique style to offer the early Christians a message of hope and to encourage them to continue to be faithful.

The Gospel reading forms the backdrop to the second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. In his Letter, the writer reminded the early Christians that it was out of great love for them that God "made us alive together in Christ-- for it is by grace you have been saved". The writer taught the Ephesians that salvation is given by God and it is not earned or merited.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, when we look at the three readings in the light of each of each other, we can discern that they are all related to Lent. The story in the first reading is a story about God's mercy, compassion and his great love for his people. God offered the Israelites another opportunity to build their lives and to live as children of God. God's gift of love saved his people from their oppressors. The Letter to the Ephesians teaches us that we are what God had made us, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life". The Gospel passage teaches us that, "those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God". The same Greek word "*ergon*" lies behind the word "works" in the passage of the Letter to the Ephesians and the word "deeds" in the Gospel passage.

The message of the three readings is that God's salvation is an undeserved gift. This gift begins with faith in God. Our faith in Jesus is symbolized by our rebirth in baptism in water and in the Spirit. Our response to God's free gift of salvation is found in our good works of service and charity. Our undeserved gift of salvation is what we rejoice about on this Sunday. So, in the spirit of this Rejoice Sunday, we need to ask ourselves these questions: How has God's gift inspired us to good works? How are we responding to God's love for us? We have been on our Lenten journey embarking on different Lenten observances to help us become closer to God. In the middle of a season that we describe as a time of making sacrifices for the sake of others, this is the time for us to joyfully open our hearts to the Spirit of love. This is the time to ask God to reawaken his gift of love in our hearts. And with the Spirit of love in our hearts, our faith may blossom and shine in our acts of service for all in the community.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.