

Sunday of week 4 of Lent - Readings

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

AT FIRST SIGHT one might wonder at the choice of the First Reading and what its relevance might be to Lent, let alone the Gospel. (There is usually some link between the First Reading and the Gospel.)

Because of the sins of the Jewish people, from the priests down, because of idolatry and other shameful and sacrilegious practices and after God sent them messenger after messenger who were not listened to, a terrible punishment fell on the whole people. This is how the sacred writer understands the destruction of the Temple and the whole city of Jerusalem and the survivors being carried off to Babylon and exile by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia.

Many years later, Cyrus, the king of Persia, became the agent of God by which God's people were once more able to return to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild their traditions and a new Temple.

Jesus, an agent of God

The Gospel has a parallel theme but on a much higher level. Jesus, the Son of God, becomes the agent of God's salvation, not just for one sinful people but for the sinfulness of the whole world. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent we are coming closer to the celebration of how that salvation was brought about.

The gospel makes a comparison with Moses, who was also an agent of God and a saviour of God's people. The Israelites in the desert had been complaining bitterly about their conditions

so they were punished by a plague of serpents and many died (Numbers 21:4-9).

At God's instructions, Moses raised up a bronze serpent on a pole "and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he recovered". John sees here a foretype of Jesus being lifted up. For John Jesus' being "lifted up" includes both his being raised up on a cross and being raised up to be with his Father in glory. In the process we were saved, healed and made whole. All those who look up to Jesus in faith will be saved, will be given "eternal life", a life that never can be taken away.

And all of this is a sign of God's own love. God sacrificed his only Son so that we might have that eternal life. He emphasises that God sent his Son to save and not to judge or condemn. In fact, no one who puts their whole self in God's hands through faith can be condemned. And it is never too late to make that step of faith.

Darkness of chosen evil

On the other hand, whoever refuses to believe is already condemned. This is not at all directed at those who sincerely follow another faith, another religion, another vision of

life. Judgment and condemnation happen where people prefer darkness to light, as indicated by lives of evil and immoral behaviour: hate instead of love; vengeance instead of forgiveness; greed instead of sharing; taking instead of giving life...

It is not a loving God who condemns; rather people choose to alienate themselves from his love. John says that all those who do wrong deliberately hate the light and choose darkness. A person who lives by truth and integrity is not afraid of the light. Such a person has nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of.

Such persons are like the salt of the earth, like a city on a hill, like a candle on a lamp stand. People can see their goodness and so be led by them to Jesus and to God.

Fear of being judged

However, there is another kind of darkness in which people live. It is the darkness of shame when there is something in their lives which they would like to share but are not able to bring out into the open. The reason is their fear of judgment, rejection or ridicule by others. One thinks of the young girl who finds herself pregnant but has no one to turn to, least of all members of her own family, or sometimes even members of the Church. One thinks of the young person who discovers he/she is homosexual and is condemned to live in the darkness of the "closet", terrified to "come out" even to, or especially to family and friends.

These are just two examples. In these cases the agents of darkness are those who sit in judgment. They themselves are living in the darkness of prejudice and hate, usually the symptoms of an inner fear and insecurity.

But as the Second Reading reminds us today, all our goodness is God's gift to us and is nothing for us to boast about. Our goodness, such as it is, is his goodness shining through us.

Let us then look at Jesus lifted up on the cross and in glory. Let us see the colossal love of God for us shown there. Let us open our hearts to that love and let it flow right through us to bring life and hope to others.