

4th Sunday of Lent - B
II Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23;
Ephesians 2:4-10;
John 3:14-21
Little Flower - 3/11/18

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent, often called Laetare Sunday from the opening word of the Entrance Antiphon. *Laetare* is a Latin word which means *rejoice*. Today we rejoice in the cross of Jesus Christ. Today we also rejoice that we are at the mid-point of our Lenten journey. Because we rejoice today, the Church invites us to lay aside violet vestments of Lent to wear rose vestments, one of only two days during the year when rose is worn.

All three readings today proclaim God's mercy. As Pope Francis frequently reminds us, mercy is the quality most proper to God.

Today's first reading reveals God to be a loving and merciful Father. As I said last Sunday, on Mount Sinai God offered the Israelites a covenant in which he promised to make them his chosen people and to give them the promised land **if** they kept the Ten Commandments. In today's reading from Second Chronicles, we get a summary of the history of Israel from Mount Sinai to the Exile: the people failed to keep the Covenant, God compassionately sent them prophets to call them to conversion, they continued to sin, and God punished them by allowing them to be sent into Exile in Babylon. Throughout, God never stopped loving Israel. He punished them out of love as parents do to call them to turn back to him.

God's greatest gift of mercy was the gift of Jesus. As Jesus said, "*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.*" According to Fr. René Latourelle, this verse demonstrates that not only does God love us, he loves us superabundantly. God's superabundant love was revealed first in the Incarnation of Jesus, i.e., God's own Son becoming one of us and living among us. This superabundance was revealed even more clearly in Jesus' death on the cross. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "*But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us*" [5:8]. As the Gospel suggests, God's love, incarnate in Jesus, is life giving.

Jesus went on to say, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*" I remember very few homilies that I have heard over the years. However, I do remember one homilist ending a homily on this Gospel saying, "Remember Jesus never comes to condemn but only to save." The bottom line is that we and everyone else are only saved through Christ's death on the cross.

Today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is a reflection on God's mercy. He affirms that God is rich in mercy. Every thing God does, he does out of love. Therefore, because of his great love for us, even when we were dead in our in our sins, God brought us to life with Christ. When Paul wrote "*by grace you have been saved,*" he used the word *grace* to remind the Ephesians that their salvation was God's free gift to them and goes on to say that God's gifts of grace are immeasurable.

My brothers and sisters, the challenging part of the reading is where Paul wrote, "*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....*" If this is true, we might be tempted to ask how important are good works to salvation. The letter of St. James gives us the best answer:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead [2:14-17].