

4th Sunday of Lent
II Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23;
Ephesians 2:4-10;
John 3:14-21
Little Flower - 3/15/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

As I mentioned on the First Sunday of Lent, the Old Testament readings this Lent focus on the theme of covenant. Today's first reading from Second Chronicles continues our journey through Old Testament salvation history. As their part of the Old Testament covenant with God, the Israelites were to keep the Ten Commandments. However, keeping the Ten Commandments did not make a person holy or even good. Rather, the Ten Commandments marked the outer boundary of the covenant. In today's first reading, we heard that the Israelites failed to keep God's commandments, even mocking God's messengers, despising his warnings, and scoffing at the prophets. Consequently, God allowed them to be conquered and the people exiled to Babylon where they remained for seventy years until the Persians came to power and King Cyrus permitted them to return to Jerusalem.

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 to wear rose vestments, one of only two days during the year when rose is worn.

Today's Gospel contains probably the best known verse of the New Testament: "*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 God's superabundant love for us. 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 Jesus himself said in today's Gospel, "*And 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.*" The bottom line is that we and everyone else are only saved through Christ's death on the cross.

The salvation Jesus came to bring is eternal life, i.e., fullness of life and life without end. In John's Gospel Jesus would also say, "*I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly*" [10:10b]. There is a beautiful Italian theological phrase: *già ma non ancora*, the already but not yet. Eternal life is not just in the future. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we already share in eternal life but do not yet experience fullness of life.

Finally, lifting up suggests the connection between crucifixion and exaltation. It was only by dying that Christ was able to rise to new life. Christ had to die in order to rise. The same is true for us. We have to die to selfishness and sin if we want to rise to the fullness of life Christ brings, a life without sin or shame, a life without secrets. As Jesus said, "*For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed.*"

My brothers and sisters, today's Gospel fills us with hope. Jesus said, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*" There are probably only three homilies that I remember from before my ordination. When I was in high school, a homilist ended a homily on today's Gospel by saying, "Remember that Christ never comes to judge but only to save."