

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 the 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.

Although today's Gospel is only seven verses long, it is rich in meaning. However, to understand the first part of the Gospel, we have to understand Jesus' reference to Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert. During the Israelites' journey through the desert, they became impatient and complained against Moses and Aaron. As punishment, God sent saraph serpents, i.e., fiery or poisonous serpents, that bit the people, killing many of them. When the people asked for forgiveness, Moses asked God to forgive them, so God told Moses to make a saraph and mount it on a pole. Those who looked upon it recovered. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the people that he must be lifted up on the cross so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Of course, John 3:16 is the most famous verse in 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 that not only does God love us, he loves us superabundantly. Although God's superabundant love was revealed first in the Incarnation, this superabundance was revealed most 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.

"*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*" Although I remember very few homilies from high school, I do remember one homilist ended a homily on this Gospel by saying, "Remember, Jesus never comes to judge but only to save." If we are judged, it is either because of our lack of faith in Jesus or because of our infidelity, i.e., our lack of faithfulness to God and to others as in the first reading. The choice of the word *infidelity* suggests once again that both Old Testament and New Testament morality is relational. Although the Israelites were carried off into captivity, God later brought them home through Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, showing that God can and does use all kinds of people to be instruments of his mercy.

Finally, according to Jesus, everyone who does evil hates the light while those who live in truth come to the light so that their works may be clearly seen as done in God. How true this is! When we do wrong, we do not want anyone to know. We do not want our wrong deeds to come to light. During my days at the Tribunal, the concepts of functional and dysfunctional families were key concepts. Unfortunately, they were often misunderstood. Many people think a functional family is a family without problems while a dysfunctional family is a family with problems. All families have problems. The difference between functional and dysfunctional families is how they handle their problems. Therapist John Bradshaw often made the point that in dysfunctional families, there are many secrets. If we want stronger families, open, honest communication is essential. I would suggest that we all work on our communication within our families during the remainder of Lent.

My brothers and sisters, today the words of St. Paul give us confidence: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God.*"