

## **[32] Fourth Sunday of Lent**

**Reading:** *2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 / Psalm 137 / Ephesians 2:4-10 / John 3:14-21*

The first sentence of our reading from 2 Chronicles gives us the setting: “In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the LORD’s temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.” God’s people had broken their covenant with the Almighty and thus had forfeited divine favor and protection. Israel had fallen and now the same fate would come to Judah. The demise of the remaining Jewish kingdom of Judah extends through the apostasy of their last four kings, culminating in the Babylonian invasion and the exile of God’s people in the Jewish diaspora. They had lost everything and were no longer a nation of their own. Many years later the Persian king Cyrus the Great would conquer the Neo-Babylonian Empire and authorize the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. Many of the exiles would then return to their homeland. The history of salvation had seen God’s people start out as a family and then become a tribe and still later a nation. Now there is a transitioning into a religion. They would have limited rule of their own, but only as supervised or oppressed by others— a situation which would last through the Roman acquisition of their territories and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

It was in light of the diminished power of the tetrarch Herod (who imagined himself a king) and the Sanhedrin, many who were fearful stooges for the occupying power that the Jewish people longed for a Davidic Messiah who would vanquish their foes by force of the sword. When Jesus entered the stage of world events, the religious leadership saw him as a threat to their position. Many of the people were drawn to him and yet they quickly became despondent when he emphasized a heavenly kingdom over an earthly one. He was not the kind of Messiah they wanted. His message of loving and even forgiving their enemies infuriated the zealots. When it came to the legal requirement of carrying a soldier’s armament, he urged them to do so for two miles (while the law said no more than one). They wanted someone who burned with hate like themselves. It seemed that instead of a military liberator, Jesus was a friend of Romans. Indeed, the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate wanted to set him free, but through bribery, disappointment, and fear, Jesus would be condemned to death. The cry of the crowd, “We have no king but Caesar!” would ironically signal how the fall of Israel and Judah were now complete. A new people would come forward, made up of not only the Jews, but from all the nations— all who would believe in Christ and in his kingdom.

The second reading emphasizes how this new kingdom comes in the person of Christ. “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ.” The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ is also one with the kingdom— the New Israel or New Zion or New Jerusalem.

The psalm echoes the longing of God's people in Babylonian exile. They struggled to maintain their identity while surrounded by pagan believers and their stories about false deities. The Babylonians worshiped several gods, the chief one being Marduk. Much to the chagrin of the Hebrews, the Babylonians were true idolaters, positing the presence of their deities in their statues and temples. As they became increasingly enculturated, many were tempted to abandon the faith of Abraham. The prophets urged them not to forget and to stay faithful to the true God that had called them. The exile would last some seventy years. "Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you! How could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten!"

Turning to the new dispensation, while much of the Jewish leadership would renounce Christ, there were a few that did not. Among them were Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Jesus told Nicodemus that "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. 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." This was and is the essential Christian kerygma. When God's people were sick and dying from snake bites, Moses had crafted a serpent on a staff or pole. Those who looked upon it were healed. The serpent was a sign of death; but this sacramental changed it into a means for hope and life. Jesus would be lifted up upon a cross, also a sign of despair and death. Nevertheless, the redemptive work of Christ and his subsequent resurrection changed it for us into a sign of hope and eternal life.

Salvation is based upon an acceptance of Christ. He is the source of grace. There is no other way to the Father. We are saved, not because we are good or faithful but first because Jesus is goodness and is faithful to the mission given him by his Father onto the Cross. He is the LIGHT in the darkness.

The darkness is Satan and yet he masquerades as light. Indeed, one of his names is Lucifer, meaning light. He is the false light that would lead us astray. He is the dark force that numbs consciences to the truth. Jesus gave sight to the blind, healed cripples, gave hearing to the deaf, restored lepers, raised the dead and yet the hearts and minds of the religious leadership were closed to him and they rejected him. Indeed, they wanted him dead and gone. How blind could they be? How deaf to his message? Is it any different today? The Church speaks out for the sanctity of human life and for the dignity of persons— and yet the leaders of this world are still quick to hate and so selfish that even babies are disposable. Many people say they believe or are enlightened but they remain in the grips of bigotry and violence. Many say they care and yet they promote pornography and an industry that reduces people, especially women, to the level of meat or flesh. Separated from God, we do not know how to be good. The devil exploits this darkness. He distracts us from Christ. He breathes his cold breath over hearts that should

be warmed by sacrifice and grace. There are all sorts of attacks against the Church and believers who witness with conviction. Why? “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed.”

We must shine with the LIGHT of Christ, even if it should illumine that which in ourselves still needs repentance and conversion.

- Have we ever blamed God for problems and faults of our own making?
- Do we really believe that God is always faithful and ready to forgive us?
- Do we place greater confidence in the world than in the values of the Gospel?
- Are you stumbling in darkness? What is the true light of our lives?
- What forces around us desire to extinguish the light of Christ in our souls?
- How have we helped others to find their way as believers or are we stumbling blocks?