

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Mar 15th 2015

Today is Laetare Sunday, so named because the Introit or Entrance Antiphon begins with the word “Rejoice” (Laetare). Coming as it does shortly after the halfway point of Lent, it offers a respite in this season of penance. We might see the priest and deacon wearing a different color at Mass today (rose—not pink!). In some parishes, flowers adorn the altar.

So what is the cause for rejoicing? The opening prayer offers an important clue. We pray to God as “[you] who through your Word reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way.” The readings go on to bear witness to various, wondrous ways in which God, throughout salvation history, has reached out in mercy to save his people, continually summoning us to return to him.

At the beginning of today’s Gospel reading, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of God’s act of mercy during the Israelites’ sojourn in the wilderness. Although they had already experienced many instances of God’s provision and protection, the Israelites complained and rebelled against him. This resulted, as they bypassed the land of Edom, in their being afflicted by seraph serpents. But when Israel cried out to God to relent, God ordered Moses to make a serpent (which he did, out of bronze) and to mount it on a pole. This precursor of Jesus’ cross was a means of healing for those who had been bitten (cf. Num 21:4–9).

In today’s first reading, the Chronicler recounts Israel’s mounting rebellion and turning away for God and his ways. Despite God’s constant outreach through sending messengers and prophets—“for he had compassion on his people” — his people continued in their evil ways, leading to the devastation of Jerusalem and the temple, as well as to the exile of the survivors. Nevertheless, God took the initiative to offer a chance to start again, and in another wondrous manner: through the mercy of a foreign king, Cyrus (whom Isaiah called “messiah”! — Isa 45:1), who allowed God’s people to return home and rebuild their temple.

The most “wonderful way” in which God reconciles is set forth in both the second reading and today’s Gospel. Paul, in the reading from Ephesians, describes God as “rich in mercy.” God’s “great love” is manifested in his bringing us to life “when we were dead in our transgressions.” The evangelist John expresses this mystery more simply: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” God holds nothing back, not even his beloved Son, in order to extend his compassionate hand to us, to bring us back to life, to restore our relationship with him and with one another. It is because God is so forbearing, magnanimous, and compassionate that we have reason to rejoice — not only this Laetare Sunday, but every day!

But the readings invite us to do more than rejoice. As we complete our Lenten journey and arrive at the Easter Triduum, we will return to John's Gospel on Holy Thursday. Then we will hear proclaimed that Jesus "loved his own . . . and he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). This line is followed by Jesus' tender act of humbly washing the feet of his disciples. The foot washing, in turn, points to John's understanding of the cross, where Jesus pours himself out in love—"to the end," that is, to the fullest extent—in order to reveal his and the Father's love for us, the wondrous love that reconciles.

It is this image of Jesus on the cross before which St. Ignatius asks retreatants to pray during the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. Praying before the crucifix, we are invited to contemplate the love of God revealed through Jesus' cross. And in the face of such love, we ask: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?

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