

March 11, 2018

### **Bishop Bradley's Reflections for the Fourth Sunday of Lent/Laetare Sunday**

This Fourth Sunday of Lent has a kind of "nickname"---it is called "Laetare" Sunday, which is a Latin word in the imperative form which means: "Rejoice"! The Church tells us to rejoice primarily because we have passed the half-way point in Lent, and we are coming down the home stretch toward the great Feast of Easter! As the Opening Prayer for today's Mass said so beautifully: "Grant, we pray, that with prompt devotion and eager faith, the Christian people may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come." And we say that because just two weeks from today, we will celebrate Palm Sunday, and then enter into Holy Week---culminating in Easter Sunday three weeks from today.

Since we have passed the half-way point, this Sunday is also a good time for each of us to stop and evaluate how we are doing with our Lenten resolutions? If we have been doing well, today is a good day to renew our efforts to keep going; if we realize we have gotten off the track a bit, or even a lot, today is a good day to get back on track---there are still three weeks of Lent left, and many graces that God wants to give us.

I think that is the main point of the Scripture Readings that we have just listened to. Lent is an important time not only to think about our own failings---to repent of our sins----to do what we were called to do on Ash Wednesday: "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel". Just as important, if not more, Lent is the time for us to realize in a new way how much God loves us---to what extents God has gone, and continues to go, to reach out to us---to call us back to Him---to give us His grace which is for the purpose of forgiving us, being one with us, helping us to know how deeply loved we are in God's sight.

Today's First Reading was from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Chronicles---not a Book we hear from too often in our Readings at Mass. In today's Reading, the history of the People of Israel was summarized in only 10 verses. Basically we heard that the People as a whole turned away from God---they refused to follow God's ways. But listen again to this beautiful line from that Reading: "*Early and often did the Lord, the God of their fathers, send His messengers to them, for He had compassion on His people and His dwelling place.*" Early and often! God is constantly revealed to us not as distant or removed, but just the opposite; He is constantly-----"early and often"-----reaching out to us to offer us His grace----to try

to help us. But sadly, the Scriptures tell us that the People more often than not refused that help.

Today's Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians gives us that same good news of God's grace. Listen again to what St. Paul taught: *"God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love He had for us, ...brought us to life with Christ. .... It is by grace you have been saved through faith----not from you---not from your works; it is the gift of God."*

And then in the passage from St. John's Gospel, we hear perhaps the best part of the Good News: *"Jesus said:....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."* And then comes the best part of all: *"God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."*

If there is any part of us that thinks that God is "out to get us" ....; if there is any part of our thinking that sees that God is only interested in catching us so He can punish us....; if there is any part of us that thinks that God does not care about me because I am not good enough, or I am not "religious" enough, or because of all the "bad things" I do that no one else even knows about. If any of us think any of those things, we have to listen to, and find comfort in, this Good News of Jesus.

As we hear so often in the Old Testament, God sent the Prophets to "speak on His behalf". He did that, as we heard this morning, "early and often". But when that didn't work, God developed a new plan---that is what we mean by the New Covenant, and that is what the New Testament is all about---and it is all summed up in the Gospel passage we just heard.

At sporting events or other major gatherings, it's normal to see someone holding up a large placard with just the words "John 3:16" on it. Have you ever seen that? That's referring to this very Gospel passage---and in particular the phrase: *"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son....God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."*

God's only concern is to save us; God's only desire is to have us be in union with Him; God's only Goal is to Love us unconditionally. And the ultimate way that He has chosen to "save us", "reunite us", and to "love us" is through His Son, Jesus!

Lent is not just about becoming aware of our failings or turning away from our sins; Lent is about realizing in a new way how much God loves us---Lent is about opening our hearts to receive God's saving grace----Lent is about turning back to the God who, as we remember in Jesus' masterful Parable of the Prodigal Son, is always waiting for us with open arms!

Now, while it is very important for us to "rejoice" in this amazing Good News of God's Love for us, we also need to remember that this Love came with a price. God did not condemn the world, but He did allow His Son to take on Himself the guilt of the world's sin---the guilt of all humanity from the days of the Old Testament and the guilt of all humanity that would come after. That includes the guilt of my sins, and the guilt of your sins!

And we know what that "price" was Jesus' death on the Cross---every time we look at the Crucifix, we remember that costly price. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son---He sacrificed His only Son for our redemption!

That's why we really need to take these next three weeks of Lent very seriously. Half of Lent is over, but just about half is still to come. During these next 3 weeks, even as we "rejoice" in God's Love for us, let us also find the time during these weeks---through additional times of prayer, through making a good confession, through our acts of self-denial and sacrifice and works of charity---let us be moved by the incredible Act of God's Love for us---Jesus crucified--- so that we will choose to live our lives with a renewed and deepened Faith.

With God's grace, which He wants to give us "early and often", may we turn away from any of the "dark" or sinful corners of our lives----acts of selfishness, fear, loneliness or indifference---so that we can live in the Truth, Who is Jesus the Light of the World.

That's the most important reason why today is called "Rejoice" Sunday--- because our God loves us so much that He has given us His Son to die for us for our salvation. It's because of Jesus' great Act of Love, which we will celebrate on Good Friday, and because of His Resurrection from the dead, which we will celebrate 3 days later on Easter Sunday----that is our reason to rejoice, and to keep living our lives in hope, in joy and in the Light of Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

God bless you, now and always!