

Homily: March 14

4th Sunday of Lent

2 Chronicles 36: 14 -16, 19 - 23; Psalm 137: 2 - 6; Ephesians 2: 4 -10;

John 3: 14 - 21

The season of Lent is not many people's favorite time of the church year, with its somber violets and today quirky rose vestments (Laetare Sunday), its fasting and its call to repentance from sin, add-up to make Lent not much fun! It's understandable that we feel that way, but the Church really wants us to come to our senses during this season, and to use the time to take stock of our lives lived under the shadow of the cross in the community of the church.

We live in a society that promotes self-help and the values of personal independence and self-sufficiency. The most important value promoted by our society is this: the more we can find in ourselves all the resources for happiness and fulfillment, the healthier and well-adjusted we are thought to be. To put it another way, our society teaches the art of saving ourselves.

Against this background we hear this refreshing declaration from St. Paul: *"It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith...it is not a reward for anything that you have done or accomplished, it is God's gift."* Salvation is not found in a secret recipe that requires us to figure out the right mixture of ingredients: sacraments received, prayers said, works of charity performed; nor is the secret of salvation buried in some theology book (the more I read theology and church documents the more I'm convinced it's the last place to expect to find any help concerning salvation); nor is the key to salvation found the writings of medieval saints for salvation can neither be learned or discovered.

Like all good things in life, it can only be received as a gift. And when received, it must never become set aside or taken for granted. Salvation only happens when we allow God to work on us like an artist works on a painting or a potter on a lump of clay. God after all is a supreme artist, and all of us human beings from the smooth diplomat to the scruffy migrant worker is God's own work of art.

In the Bible God has many “images,” a farmer, a loving Father looking for a prodigal son, a good shepherd, and a potter who forms us out of the clay of the earth and blows life into us.

Today’s gospel tells us that the gift of salvation was given because *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, not to condemn the world, but that it might be saved through him.”* During these last three weeks of Lent, we would do well to memorize these words and enshrine them in our hearts and minds. God so loved the world, loved it not a little but SO MUCH that he gave his only Son not to condemn us but to save us, not to destroy us but to renew us.

Every time we look at the crucifix here in the sanctuary or the one that graces our home, we are reminded of how much love God has for us. I wonder at times if we have become too comfortable with the symbol of the cross as we are no longer shocked by the strangeness of the saving power of Jesus’ death.

If your child came home and told you he/she just joined a group that has as its logo a hangman’s noose you would justifiably be upset. Yet our central symbol of faith is the cross that is just as deadly as a hangman’s noose. So perhaps we have tamed the symbol too much we need to recapture something of the strangeness of it all. For you see there nothing harmonious, reasonable or even peaceful about the gift of salvation. It cuts across all our human activities of economics, politics, government, and even family. The gift of salvation frustrates us because we cannot tame or contain it.

We place a high value on self-help, and we are uncomfortable with the fact that salvation is only received as a gift without our having done anything to deserve it. To fully appreciate this divine gift calls, us to move beyond traditional spirituality that views human beings as miserably sinful, unworthy of God’s love. The demands that living under the shadow of the cross makes upon our lives is quite unlike the pabulum offered on self-help websites.

During the season of Lent the Church asks us to reflect on two fundamental beliefs God's unconditional love for us, and the free gift of salvation manifested in the cross of Jesus. Our society tells us only to consolidate, hold on to ourselves, pamper ourselves, learn comfort from our choices and all will be fine. The cross calls us to be open to others, not be self-seeking, holding up every decision against the foolishness of the cross. This is as difficult as it is painful.

Fr. Bill