

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - B

March 11, 2018

First Reading – Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 137

Second Reading – Ephesians 2:4-10

Gospel – John 3:14-21

My dear people of God:

I wish to start our reflection today by quoting the Responsorial Psalm: *“Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you”* which comes from Psalm 137. You might be interested to know that Don McLean sang a part of this psalm several years ago. He entitled it *“By the Waters of Babylon”*. He rendered it meditatively, I should say. Psalm 137 depicts the Israelites’ Captivity in Babylon and demonstrates the longing of the Israelite captives to be back into where they were and how they were.

That same psalm also demonstrates our longing to be back into God’s fold as we enter the fourth week of our Lenten journey. Our first reading talks about the departure of the Israelites from the ways of God. And who were the most guilty? I am afraid the answer is: the priests and the princes of Judah!

Back to Psalm 137: It would be safe to date the Babylonian Exile or Babylonian Captivity sometime between 598 BC and 587 BC. It ended when the Persian king, Cyrus invaded Babylon in October 538 BC. Most Biblical scholars say that Psalm 137 (which says that the Israelites hung up their harps on the aspens (*some bibles say, willows, others say poplars*)) may have been composed between 539 BC and 537 BC.

The first three verses describe the situation of the chosen people suffering while in captivity in Babylon, enduring the sporting taunts of their enemies, and weeping over their sorrows as they contrasted their status with what it once was in their beloved Jerusalem. They remembered Zion when they were made fun of by their captors.

The ancient city of Babylon was situated near the Euphrates River, but the plural (waters/rivers/streams) here probably refers to the great network of canals which had been built for purposes of irrigation. The gardens and industries thus watered were in all likelihood the areas where the Hebrew slaves would have been employed.

"There we sat down and wept." The picture that emerges here is one of extreme dejection, sorrow and bitterness that the captives went through; a picture that provides a sharp contrast to the awesome life that they lived in Jerusalem.

"They asked us to sing our songs." The songs of the captives would have been considered as *sport or entertainment* by their masters; and the very fact of their hanging their harps on the poplars/aspens/willows indicates that they unwillingly complied with such demands, muttering to themselves, perhaps, curses upon themselves. Their extremely distasteful order of entertaining their captors and amusing them precipitated the bitter thoughts of the next three verses: *"How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten (meaning: let my right hand forget her skills, and thus be rendered useless). Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you; if I prefer not Jerusalem above all of my joys."*

"How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land?". This is not a reference to their inability to sing such songs for their captors. It is an exclamation of their extreme displeasure in being compelled to do so.

But help came to the Israelites when Yahweh, the Lord, chose Cyrus, King of Persia, to liberate and restore His people to their original state. It is worthy to note that a non-Israelite was chosen by God to liberate Israelites.

Those who returned to Jerusalem when Cyrus permitted and encouraged it were 42,462. Josephus gave that number of the returnees. God had promised the return of the captives and the rebuilding of Jerusalem at the end of seventy years. That time to favor Zion, that *set time*, came at last.

Brothers and sisters: let us think *what* and *how much* desolation sin has inflicted into the world - and even into the church of God, but let us also be thankful that the Lord provides a brand new start, a fresh beginning. As

He did in Babylon, so will He still do during our time, by His Almighty grace, through the justifying and soul-adorning righteousness of Christ our Savior.

God had already forewarned through his prophet over 100 years before Cyrus was born, in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 44, verse 28 that Jerusalem and the Temple would be rebuilt by Cyrus, God's anointed. God used Cyrus' service for a time to liberate His Church.

Let us take a look at the second reading: Today's second reading presents the immeasurable nature of God's grace which has totally changed both our *reality* and *conduct* forever. I wish to borrow the term used mostly by weight-loss advertisers: the "*before*" and "*after*". Please realize that the enactment of divine love and grace has radically altered everything about who we are and whose we are, about how we live, why we live, and even where we live.

We need to understand and appreciate the vision of Christian existence which Paul demonstrates. For us to profoundly grasp Paul's theology, let us go back to verses 1 to 3. Please know that our reading in the Lectionary for today starts on verse 4.

Paul, in verses 1 to 3 reminds us of our sorry state in the past: previously we were dead because of our trespasses and sins by which we conducted our lives; our existence was also a matter of utter bondage to evil powers in "this world," and "in the flesh."

The term "flesh" depicts the human condition in which our passions, cravings, and mindset are in total disrepute and disobedience. While this was the former existence of Christians, it remains sadly the current reality for most of us. But thanks be to God's intervening actions and the transformation they wrought, we have been saved. God acted out of the wealth of His Divine Mercy and the abundance of His Love. Brothers and sisters, it behooves us to realize that this divine conversion had nothing to do with how lovable we were (because we were not lovable after all), but with how loving God is - how incredibly loving He is. Thus, God made us alive with Christ, raised us with Christ, and sat us in the heavenly places where Christ now rules. God the Father did to us what He had previously done to His Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul declares: "*you have been saved by grace*". It is interesting to note that the original text in Greek was in the Passive Voice. The use of the passive voice underscores how totally passive we are when it comes to being saved. God's

active grace has accomplished our salvific reality: our salvation. And such reality is an on-going reality. It was accomplished in the past and remains our reality into the coming ages as the ongoing demonstration of the immeasurable riches of Divine Grace. We are ushered into reflecting the sheer enormity of God's mercy, love, grace, and kindness which has brought about such an altered state of our existence as Christians.

The surpassing riches of God's grace made two interrelated points:

(1) first; the radical change we have experienced is a pure gift of God's grace: "*not from us*"; "*neither from works*". Our transformation is in no way the result of our action/activity. Faith as the means by which God's grace has saved us is *not an action which stems from our own volition* but as *that component of grace which empowers our faith response*.

(2) second: while our salvation is not from works, we must also understand works are an indispensable component of God's grace. Because we were created in Christ Jesus (that is, made alive and raised with Christ), we are God's handiwork with the goal of good works. These good works are so vital that God had prepared them ahead of time. Our works have not saved us, but they are part of the goal God had in mind in saving us. Hence good works are not simply the by-products of our conversion but were pre-planned and pre-prepared by God.

Thus our reality and conduct, our being and doing, are intricately and indelibly intertwined, both in our former existence of being dead in trespasses and in our ongoing existence of being made alive with Christ.

Now, let us go to the Gospel. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus leads into this passage about three related subjects:

- (1) The Son of Man being lifted up
- (2) Eternal life
- (3) Judgment

While Psalm 23 is the most memorized Psalm, John 3:16 is probably the most loved verse in the Bible. We hear it frequently, but we should not remove it apart from its context. We must not forget that it is "*whoever believes in (the Son of Man)*" who "*should not perish*" (verse 15); and *that the one "who doesn't believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God"* (verse 18).

It would be beneficial for us to go back to the beginning of chapter 3, where Nicodemus, a Pharisee came to Jesus by night. Please remember that our gospel starts on verse 14. Their conversation centered on being born from above. Jesus told Nicodemus, *“Unless one is born anew, he can’t see the Kingdom of God”* (verse 3). Nicodemus did not understand Jesus, but thought that Jesus was speaking of physical rebirth. He asked: *“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?”* (verse 4).

The explanation of Jesus was more puzzling than His original statement: *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit... The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound, but don’t know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit”* (verses 6 & 8).

After commenting on Nicodemus’ lack of understanding, Jesus said in verses 12-13: *“If I told you earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven”*.

It is this last phrase about the one being “descended from heaven” that leads directly into our text on verse 14: *“lifted up”*. The one who came down from above will be lifted up.

My dear people of God: As I mentioned earlier, this passage links three related subjects as noted above: (1) the lifting up of the Son of Man, which makes eternal life possible. (2) God’s love for the world, which prompted God’s gift of the Son so that those who believe in Him should have eternal life. (3) The judgment or condemnation of those who do not believe in the Son.

These three are so closely related and they comprise only one theme. Verse 16 is positive and reassuring, and we delight in its message of God’s love and our salvation. But for us to appreciate verse 16 more profoundly, we need to hear verses 14-15 first, where Jesus linked His coming death to the story of Moses and the serpent in the Book of Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4-9; a story which every Jewish child knows. The Israelites sinned by grumbling against God for bringing them out of Egypt into the wilderness. God punished them with a plague of fiery serpents, killing many Israelites. The Israelites confessed their sin and begged for mercy, so God told Moses to make a bronze

serpent and hold it aloft on a pole. Whoever looked up at the bronze serpent was saved from the fiery serpents, were given a new life. They were born anew.

Let us keep in mind the earlier comment of Jesus about being born anew in verse 3, and Nicodemus' question about re-entering his mother's womb to be born again in verse 4. Jesus expected Nicodemus to link the serpent story to the words of Jesus about being born again or born from above.

Both the "lifted up" serpent and the "lifted up" Jesus confer new life on those who look upon or believe in them.

In both stories, we realize the following:

- (1) the people were in danger of death because of their sin.
- (2) God provides the agent of salvation—the bronze serpent in the first story and the Son of Man in the second.
- (3) The agent of salvation is lifted up.
- (4) The people are saved by looking at and believing in God's agent of salvation.

However, there are two significant differences:

(1) **First:** the bronze snake was only a piece of bronze, having no saving power in itself. When Israelites began to make offerings to the bronze serpent, treating it as an idol, Hezekiah destroyed it (2 Kings 18:4). In contrast, Jesus is invested with saving power and is worthy of our worship.

(2) **Second:** looking at the "lifted up" bronze snake gave the Israelites extended physical life. Looking upon the "lifted up" Jesus gives us eternal life. It is interesting to note that the term, "lifted up" has multiple meanings in this Gospel. Yes, it refers to the cross of Jesus, but it also refers to His resurrection, ascension and glorification. Jesus will be lifted up on the cross, the great Paschal sacrifice; He will be raised up on the third day, conquering death. His cross and His resurrection/ascension are simply different facets of His glorification.

We tend to think of eternal life as life without end, and it does have that sense (John 6:58). However, it also refers to a quality of life lived in the presence of God. Later, in His prayer, Jesus will define eternal life this way: *"This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and him whom you sent, Jesus Christ"* (John 17:3).

He who believes in Him is not judged. He who doesn't believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and doesn't come to the light, lest his works would be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his works may be revealed, that they have been done in God.

We dare not take the gift of God's Son lightly. It was an enormously costly gift for God to give, and we ignore the gift at our peril. It is human decision rather than divine fiat that condemns those who refuse to accept God's terms.

Jesus' work is efficacious only if the world accepts the proffered salvation. John puts it this way: *"He who believes in him is not judged. He who doesn't believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God"* (verse 18).

The name of Jesus in Aramaic is Yashua (or Joshua), which means "Yahweh (God) saves." The New Testament gives Jesus many titles (Christ, Messiah, Lord, and Master), but JESUS ("God saves") is HIS NAME. The one who fails to believe in the name of the Savior has not accepted the salvation offered by the Savior, and thus "has been judged or condemned already."

***"This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil"* (verse 19). Such a person *"hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works would be exposed"* (verse 20). The images conjured up by such language are sinister but all too real. They remind us of the danger of dark streets - illicit transactions accomplished in out-of-the-way-places; people clothed in dark clothing to make themselves invisible in the night.**

History can cite examples of people who loved darkness because their deeds were evil. The twentieth century was filled with examples of monstrous evil. The Holocaust is the most familiar example, but other examples include Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution, Idi Amin's reign of terror in Uganda, and Pol Pot's killing fields in Cambodia. You can multiply examples here. The list goes on and on.

Let us pray then that our belief and trust in Jesus would increase each day and that we would fix our gaze on Him. And let us pray that Jesus lift us up unto the realms of the Divine after our sojourn on this planet. Amen.