

SYNOPSIS OF LENT IV [B] SUNDAY (March 11) HOMILY

Introduction: The Fourth Sunday of Lent is called *Lætare* (Rejoice) Sunday, from the first words of today's liturgy. As on *Gaudete* Sunday in Advent, rose-colored vestments may replace violet and flowers may grace the altar, symbolizing the Church's joy in anticipation of the Resurrection of Our Lord. The central theme of today's readings is that our salvation is the free gift of a merciful God, given to us sinners through Jesus, His Son. The readings stress God's mercy and compassion and remind us of the great love, kindness and grace extended to us in Christ.

The Scripture lessons summarized: In the first reading, taken from the Second Book of Chronicles, we learn the compassion and patience of God. God allowed Cyrus the Great, a pagan conqueror, to become the instrument of His mercy and salvation to His chosen people who were in exile in Babylon. In the second reading, Paul tells us that God is so rich in mercy that He has granted us eternal salvation and eternal life as a free gift through Christ Jesus. Today's Gospel has a parallel theme, but on a much higher level. Jesus, the Son of God, became the agent of God's salvation, not just for one sinful nation but for the sinfulness of the whole world. Through John 3:16, the Gospel teaches us that God expressed His love, mercy and compassion for us by giving His only Son for our salvation. Nicodemus, the wealthy Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, meets Jesus by night and begins a long religious discussion. Jesus explains to him that he must believe Jesus' words because he is the Son of God. He further explains to Nicodemus God's plan of salvation by referring to the story of Moses and the bronze serpent (Nm 21:1-9). Just as God saved the victims of serpent bite through the bonze serpent, He is going to save mankind from its sins by permitting the crucifixion and death of His Son Jesus because the love of God for mankind is that great. **Life messages:** 1) We need to love the cross, the symbol of God's forgiving and merciful love: As a forceful reminder not only of God's love and mercy, but also of the price of our salvation, the crucifix invites us to more than generosity and compassion. It inspires us to remove the suffering of other people's misery. It encourages us not only to feel deep sorrow for another's suffering but also to try our best to remove that suffering. Hence, let us love the cross, wear its image and carry our own daily cross with joy, while helping other to carry their heavier crosses. 2) We need to reciprocate God's love by loving others. God's love is unconditional, universal, forgiving and merciful. Let us try to make an earnest attempt to include these qualities in sharing our love with others during Lent. 3) Our rebirth by water and the Spirit must be an ongoing process. That is, we must lead a life of repentance and conversion bringing us to renewal of life, with the help of the Holy Spirit living within us, through prayer, Bible reading, frequenting the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist and doing corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

LENT IV B (March 11) II Chr 36:14-16, 19-23; Eph 2:4-10; Jn 3:14-21

Anecdotes: #1: “The Hound of Heaven”: “The Hound of Heaven,” written by Francis Thompson, is one of the best-known religious poems in the English language. It describes the pursuit of the human soul by God. The poem tells the story of a human soul who tries to flee from God as it thinks that it will lose its freedom in the company of God. This is the story of Thompson’s own life. As a boy, he intended to become a priest. But the laziness of his brilliant son prompted Thompson’s father to enroll young Francis in a medical school. There he became addicted to opium that almost wrecked his body and mind. He fled to a slum and started earning a living by shining shoes, selling matches, and holding horses. In 1887 Francis sent some poems and an essay to Mr. Wilfrid Meynell, the editor of a Catholic literary magazine called *Merry England*. The editor recognized the genius behind these works and published them in April 1888. Then Meynell went in search of the poet. He arranged accommodation for Francis, introduced him to other poets and helped him to realize God’s love. How Francis tried to run away from God, how God “hunted” him, how Divine love caught up with him – these are the themes of his stirring poem, “The Hound of Heaven.” Once we realize, as did the poet Francis Thompson and all the saints, that God in His love for us, pursues our souls to the ends of the earth and beyond, then we will try to return to that Love and allow the Hound of Heaven to “catch” us. Today’s Gospel tells us about the breadth and depth and height of the Divine love of the Hound of Heaven for each one of us.

2: Glimpse of God’s love in the Amtrak tragedy: Near Mobile, Alabama, there was a railroad bridge that spanned a big bayou. The date was September 22, 1993. It was a foggy morning, just before daybreak, when a tugboat accidentally pushed a barge into the bayou. The drifting barge slammed into the river bridge. In the darkness no one could see the extent of the damage, but someone on the tugboat radioed the Coast Guard. Minutes later, an Amtrak train, the Sunset Limited, reached the bridge as it traveled from Los Angeles to Miami. Unaware of the damage, the train crossed the bridge at 70 mph. There were 220 passengers on board. As the weight of the train broke the support, the bridge gave away. Three locomotive units and the first four of the train’s eight passenger cars fell into the alligator infested bayou. In the darkness, the fog was thickened by fire and smoke. Six miles from land, the victims were potential food for the aroused alligators. Helicopters were called in to help rescue the victims. Rescuers were able to save 163 persons. But one rescue stands out. Gary and Mary Jane Chancey were waiting in the railcar with their eleven-year-old daughter Andrea. When the car went into the bayou and began to fill rapidly with water, there was only one thing they could do. They pushed their young daughter through the window into the hands of a rescuer, and then succumbed to their watery death. Their sacrificial

love stands out especially because their daughter was imperfect by the world's standards. She was born with cerebral palsy and needed help with even the most routine things. But she was precious to her parents. We, too, are imperfect – our lives filled with mistakes, sin and helplessness. But we are still precious to God – so precious that He sacrificed his Son Jesus to save us. Today's Gospel tells us how a perfect God sent His Perfect Son to save an imperfect world.

3: Nicodemus in art and history: One of Rembrandt's most famous etchings portrays the scene. The limp, dead body of Jesus was slowly taken down from the cross. Joseph of Arimathea, dressed as the person that he was, in all his finery, stands close by. In the darkness, further away, veiled in shadow as only Rembrandt could do it, with his face lined in sorrow, is Nicodemus. He is holding in his hands the linen cloth in which Jesus' body would be buried. The Gospel says that Nicodemus also brought with him a mixture of spices, myrrh and aloes, "about a hundred pounds". One wonders what Nicodemus must have been thinking as he stood there, waiting for the body of Christ to be taken down from the cross. Obviously, much was going on in his life -- this wealthy man, bringing fine linen and a bountiful amount of expensive spices to anoint the body of one who had died as a common criminal. Was he still mystified as he had been when Jesus told him that he must be born again? Was he still puzzled by the response of Jesus when he pressed his question about how one could be born again? Jesus' answer had been totally unsatisfying for his rational mind: "The Spirit blows where it wills -- you feel it, and you hear the sound of it -- but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."(24 Additional anecdotes will be uploaded in our website: stjohngrandbay.org)

Introduction: The Fourth Sunday of Lent is called *Lætare* (Rejoice) Sunday, from the first words of the day's liturgy [the *Introit*]. Since this Sunday occurs in the middle of Lent, as *Gaudete* Sunday is celebrated midway through Advent, *Lætare* Sunday reminds us of the Event we look forward to at the end of the penitential season. As on *Gaudete* Sunday, rose-colored vestments may replace violet and flowers may grace the altar. These outward signs symbolize the Church's joy in anticipation of the Resurrection, a joy which cannot be contained even in Lent, though we still refrain from Alleluias and the singing of the Gloria until the magnificence of the Easter Vigil.

The central theme of today's readings is that our salvation is the free gift of a merciful God given to us through Jesus, His, Son. The readings stress God's mercy and compassion and remind us of the great love, kindness and grace extended to us in Christ. As an act of love and gratitude to God Who is "*rich in mercy*" and as an expression of our Faith, we are invited to share Jesus' sufferings by doing penance during Lent so that we may inherit our eternal salvation and the glory of his Resurrection in Heaven. As we continue our Lenten observance for

the fourth week, the Sacred Liturgy invites us to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's grace, mercy and salvation. In the first reading, taken from the Second Book of Chronicles, we learn the compassion and patience of God. God allowed Cyrus the Great, a pagan conqueror, to become the instrument of His mercy and salvation for His chosen people who were in exile in Babylon. In the second reading, Paul tells us that God is so rich in mercy that He has granted us eternal salvation and eternal life as a free gift through Christ Jesus. Today's Gospel has a parallel theme, but on a much higher level. Jesus, the Son of God, became the agent of God's salvation, not just for one sinful nation but for the sinfulness of the whole world. Through John 3:16, the Gospel teaches us that God expressed His love, mercy and compassion for us all by giving His only Son for our salvation.

First reading (2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23) explained: Today's Gospel contains this lament of John the Evangelist: *"The light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light."* The chronicler in the first reading says the same thing about the chosen people long ago: *"But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His warnings, and scoffed at His prophet."* It also reminds them that *early and often did the Lord God send messengers to the people out of deep compassion for them* (2 Chronicles 36:15). The Second Book of Chronicles describes the history of the period from the reign of Israel's first king, Saul, (1030 BC), to the end of Judah's exile in Babylon (550 BC). The Chronicles presents the successful periods of Israel's development as God's reward for fidelity, and the tragedies which befell Israel and the losses at war as God's punishment for its infidelity. Today's passage shows us how the people's infidelities caused them to lose the Temple and their homeland, and how God arranged, through the pagan king of Persia, to return them to their homeland and to help them rebuild His Temple there. This short, sad summary with a hopeful ending is told from the viewpoint of a conviction that right worship will restore a people. God is willing to use desperate measures, even the heartbreak of his people, to save them and not to hurt them.

Second Reading (Ephesians 2:4-10) explained: Both the second reading from Ephesians and the gospel periscope reminds us to focus on the mystery of salvation as a *gift* to sinners. Paul teaches that, although we don't deserve anything from God on our own merits, God chose to love, save and give life to us - both Jewish and Gentile Christians - because of His great mercy and love. In the first half of his letter, Paul says that Divine grace did three things for us: a) brought us to life in Christ, b) raised us up with Christ, and c) seated us in the Heavens. The sole purpose of these Divine deeds was to show the immeasurable riches of God's grace. In the second half of the reading, Paul contrasts what we can achieve spiritually on our own (nothing), with what God gives us as undeserved grace

(everything). Paul also reminds us that all our goodness is God's gift to us and is nothing for us to boast about. Our goodness, such as it may be, is His goodness shining through us. "By grace we are saved through Faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph 4:8-10). The second reading thus reveals "the great love [God] had for us." Further, while this reading affirms that we are "saved through faith," it also makes clear that this faith itself "is the gift of God. More love!"

Gospel Exegesis: The context: Nicodemus, the wealthy Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, meets Jesus by night and begins a long religious discussion. But Jesus interrupts him, stating that rebirth by water and the Spirit is an essential condition for entering the Kingdom of God. Jesus explains to him that Nicodemus must believe Jesus' words because Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus further explains God's plan of salvation by referring to the story of Moses and the bronze serpent. He also reveals the Good News that God will show His love for mankind by subjecting His own Son to suffering and death.

A) The uplifted serpent: John refers to an Old Testament story given in Numbers 21:4-9. On their journey through the wilderness, the people of Israel murmured and complained, regretting that they had ever left Egypt. To punish them, God sent a plague of deadly serpents. When the people repented and cried for mercy, God instructed Moses to make an image of a serpent and to hold it up in the midst of the camp so that those who looked upon the serpent might be healed through the power of God. In today's Gospel lesson, Nicodemus learns that, like Moses' bronze serpent, Jesus, too, must be "lifted up" (a contemporary euphemism for being crucified), and that the act of His being "lifted up" will similarly bring about salvation. This is the first of three references in John's Gospel to Jesus being "lifted up" (cf. 8:28, 12:32-34). Specifically, this reference foreshadows the crucifixion of Jesus who carried with him the burden of the sins of the world. When humans turn their thoughts to their crucified Savior and believe in him, they too will find eternal life. Jesus was lifted up twice: on the Cross and at his Ascension into Heaven. Just as the cross was the way to glory for Jesus, so it is for us. We can, if we like, refuse the cross that every Christian is called to bear. It is an unalterable law of human life, however, that without the cross, there is no crown.

B) Believing in Jesus: This includes three elements: 1) the belief that God is our loving Father, 2) the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and, therefore, tells us the truth about God and life, and 3) the belief that we must give unquestioning obedience to Jesus. "I believe in " means I put my trust in Jesus and I seek to obey Him. The Faith of which our Lord speaks is not just intellectual acceptance of the truths He has taught: it involves recognizing Him as Son of God (cf. 1 John 5:1), sharing His very life (cf. John 1:12) and surrendering ourselves to Him out of love,

thereby becoming like Him (cf. John 10:27; 1 John 3:2) (Navarre Bible). The Catholic doctrine teaches that salvation is “*by grace through Faith unto good works*” (Eph 2:8-10). We must do “good works” if we have been truly saved. In other words, if we are saved by our Faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, good works will follow as our acts of thanksgiving. This favor from God is constantly being offered, and our challenge is to respond to it gratefully by leading a good life. Thus, we will receive from God eternal life, the very life of God Himself. Then we will experience peace with God, peace with men, peace with life and peace with ourselves.

C) The Gospel of the Gospels: John 3:16 is probably the best loved verse in the Bible and it has been called “everybody’s text” and the “Gospel of the Gospels.” “*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 is the summary of the Gospel message of salvation through Christ Jesus. This text is the very essence of the Gospel. It tells us that the God takes the initiative in all salvation because of His love for man. As St. Augustine puts it: “God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.” It also explains to us the universality of the love of God. God’s motive is love and God’s objective is salvation. Those who actually receive eternal life must believe in the Son. “Such depth of God’s love this Gospel reveals: God gave the only; Son, allowed the only Son to be “lifted up” on a cross, and now remains patient with us while we struggle with choosing between darkness and light, evil and truth. Moreover, in the very midst of our ongoing struggle, it is God who brings us to greater belief and leads us to eternal life. Such is the depth of love God has for us!”

D) Love of darkness and God’s judgment: When we walk according to the teachings of Christ, we are walking in the Light. If we oppose these teachings, we oppose Christ himself; hence, we are walking in darkness. In today’s text, we are told, *Light has come into the world, but people loved the darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.* There are many dark corners in our world. Addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling and pornography, sexual immorality, environmental irresponsibility, and a lack of purpose among so many of us, especially among young people, are a few of these dark corners. It is very easy to pretend that these dark corners don’t exist. We act like the desert nomad in the story who woke up hungry in the middle of the night. He lit a candle and began eating dates from a bowl beside his bed. He took a bite from one and saw a worm in it; so he threw it out of the tent. He bit into the second date, found another worm, and threw it away also. Reasoning that he wouldn’t have any dates left to eat if he continued to look for worms, he blew out the candle and quickly ate the rest of the dates!

Our lives matter to God, and He knows all about the dark corners in our lives. He wants us to stop hiding our sin in the dark and demands that we expose every dark corner to His Light of life. He is giving to us the Light that not only shows up the dirt in our lives but cleans it away. He died so that we could be made new and clean. Freely, the light of His forgiveness shines into our lives, brightening up every corner, forgiving every sin, restoring our relationship with God, renewing our lives.

Life messages: 1) We need to love the cross, the symbol of God's forgiving and merciful love: The crucifix – the symbol of the “lifted up” Jesus - holds a central place in our Churches because it is a forceful reminder not only of God's love and mercy, but also of the price of our salvation. Hence, no Christian home should be without this symbol of God's love. The crucifix invites us to respond with more than compassion; it inspires us to remove the suffering of other people's misery. It encourages us not only to feel deep sorrow for another's suffering, but also to try our best to remove that suffering. Hence, let us love the cross, wear its image and carry our own daily cross with joy.

2) We need to reciprocate God's love by loving others. God's love is unconditional, universal, forgiving and merciful. Let us try, with His help, to make an earnest attempt to include these qualities as we share our love with others during Lent.

3) Our rebirth by water and the Spirit must be an ongoing process. As Christians, we are meant to lead a life of repentance and on-going conversion, bringing us to a renewal of life with the help of the Holy Spirit living within us. The renewal of the Spirit comes when we work with Him to be liberated from the bondage of evil habits by using the Divine strength we receive through prayer, Bible reading and frequenting the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist.

4) Let us be bearers of Jesus' light and carry it to other people. When we allow the Light of God's forgiveness to shine in our lives, it brightens up every corner, forgives every sin, restores our relationship with God and renews our lives. Whoever follows Jesus will not walk in darkness. We will experience the joy and peace of sins forgiven, of new attitudes and of new relationships with family and friends. Jesus' Light of truth, justice, holiness and charity shining in our lives ought to bring blessing to others. We are to let this Light of Christ shine through us into the lives of the people around us. The Light we give to others can dispel the darkness of their lives and bring them to a completely new outlook. Let us not underestimate what the Light of Christ can do through us. As Jesus said: *“You are the light of the world.... your light must shine before people so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in Heaven”* (Matthew 5:14, 16).

