

Sunday March 14th, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Lent Parishioner Reflection

By: Sandra Fortini

This weekend we celebrate *Laetare* Sunday. A Latin word that means rejoice. The purple vestments and altar cloths will be changed for a lighter rose colour. We are at the midpoint of the Lenten Season and this Sunday we are given an opportunity to pause and rejoice before we enter deeper into our meditative reflection of the Gospel and open our hearts to God's refining grace through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Even as we observe our Lenten sacrifices, we are given a beautiful day of hope with Easter within sight.

My father was the organist and choir director at our parish so Lent was always a very involved time for our family. A time that I developed a great love for. Lent became a point of focus for me at a very early age which helped to develop my faith. I loved the hymns, rituals and traditions of the 40 days and the Easter Triduum. I never found it burdensome or austere because I began to recognize the transformative power of the time as I matured and my encounter with Christ deepened. It still remains my favourite time of year and one of the reasons that I went on to study religion.

In my studies I learned that being Christian is not an action or ideology. It is "an encounter with Christ." I feel that this is also a very poignant description of the Season of Lent.: A transforming encounter with the Son of God who gives us life, direction, and purpose. This week's readings tell the story of this sentiment beautifully. Salvation is a gift of love and mercy that we must choose to accept.

Throughout Lent the Old Testament readings have been recounting the history of Israel. God's covenant with Noah, The binding of Issac and the sacrifice of Abraham, last week Moses and the Ten Commandments and this week the exile of Israel. Each of these

stories foreshadows the salvation of the Gospel story and highlights God's salvific love and mercy. We, humankind, are given a gift, we turn away from God, and ultimately we are received back to start anew. Each story directs us to the (culminating) coming promise of Christ.

Just as Noah brought with him those whom God would save, Christ takes upon himself the task of saving us who sin, from death and darkness. We read that Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son and are reminded that God the Father loved us so much that He was also willing to sacrifice His only Son for the forgiveness of our sins. God through Moses gives us the Ten Commandments; the laws to live a good and holy life. Jesus fulfills these commandments and is the way, the truth, and the life.

This fourth Sunday of Lent we hear that the people of Israel rebelled and were divided, they turned away from God, and suffered the consequences of their sins. The Temple was destroyed, Jerusalem was in ruin and the people were taken into exile in Babylon. But the story does not end there. King Cyrus became an instrument of God and brought salvation to His people returning them home and rebuilding Jerusalem. Another story which foreshadows our salvation to come in Christ, and establishes the promise that *in Jesus* we can never be separated from God again.

Paul reminds us to look forward and '*Laetare*' today in the second reading. To rejoice in the great love and mercy of the coming celebration of Easter. That while we were "dead in our transgressions (sins)" and could do nothing to save ourselves, God offered us salvation with Jesus' death and resurrection. This saving action is a pure and undeserved **gift** from God. If it is a gift, none of us can claim we have been saved through our own efforts and actions. Rather, we have been made *in* Christ Jesus for good works, an integral part of our Christian life. How in this season of Lent have I lived my calling to serve others? How can I make my life an offering for the needs of others and the world?

We have seen 'John 3:16' on t-shirts, billboards and bumper stickers etc. for good reason. Because God's love and mercy is the dynamic principle for salvation. Hearing and reading that could never get old in my mind. But like so many things we hear and see repeatedly, we can easily lose the depth of its meaning in our lives. Further, if we do not continue to read what comes next, we may not fully appreciate the command we have been given.

God gave us his Son, not to condemn but to save. He brought light into the darkness of the world. Now we as followers of Christ must come to the light, and also *be* a light to the world. As Pope Francis said, "In our Christian life ...may prayer and action always be deeply united. A prayer that does not lead you to practical action for your brother — the poor, the sick, those in need of help, a brother in difficulty — is a sterile and incomplete prayer." Our own actions play a part in determining salvation or condemnation. The light that is Jesus has come into the world to expose sin *so that we may be forgiven*. A real reason to rejoice! What do we do with God's love and mercy? What conversion of mind, heart or life is the Lord asking of me?

As we journey towards Calvary with Jesus, let us do so with a contrite heart.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Lord Jesus, strengthen our faith and give us the grace to accept your gift of mercy so that as we await the promise of Easter we may do so with an open heart.