

4th Sunday of Lent - B

Note: The readings given for Cycle A may be used in place of the Cycle B readings.

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

The book of 2nd Chronicles covers the same time period as 1st and 2nd Kings. As is the case with Samuel and Kings, the two books of Chronicles were originally one book but appear as two in the Greek version of the Bible (the Septuagint) and this division is maintained in the Vulgate and in later editions, including the Hebrew Bible.

The inspired writer was probably a Levite from Jerusalem, given his respectful attention to the Temple and its institutions; he probably edited the text – if one accepts Ezra and Nehemiah as the original authors as some have suggested – after the death of those prophets and before the 3rd century B.C. since Sirach takes it as read in the year 180 B.C.

Second Chronicles focuses on the history of Solomon and after the division of the kingdom it concentrates on the kingdom of Judah and its kings (who are all of the line of David). Finally, the book finishes with an account of the fall of Jerusalem, exile to Babylon and the edict of Cyrus, king of Persia, allowing the Jews to return to Israel. This is our reading for today.

¹⁴ [In those days] all the princes of Judah, the priests and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the LORD'S temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy. ¹⁹ [Their enemies] burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Chaldeans (the country of which Babylon was the capital), invaded Judah in 605 B.C. and exiled many of the craftsmen to Babylon. In 597 B.C. he conquered Jerusalem, exiling the aristocracy to Babylon. He destroyed the Temple when he quelled the revolt of Zedekiah in 586 B.C. and exiled even more Jews.

²⁰ Those who escaped the sword he carried captive to Babylon, where they became his and his sons' servants until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. ²¹ All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah: "Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled."

Jeremiah 25:12. This is a reflection on the evil of not listening to God's prophets; it culminates in a declaration that the exile would last 70 years. Moreover, it is a punishment for neglecting the

Sabbath-year law of Leviticus 25:4 and Exodus 23:10-11.

²² In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia,

Isaiah 44:28 calls him the shepherd of Yahweh who will accomplish Yahweh's will; and gives him the grandiose title of "the anointed of Yahweh," who grasps his right hand – a title which was earlier reserved to Jewish kings and priests.

in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: ²³ "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!'"

In 538 B.C. Cyrus permitted the Jews residing in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and its Temple. The text of Cyrus' decree is quoted in Ezra 1:1-4. Cyrus had a policy of restoring the images of captured gods to their original temples, which he often rebuilt. Since the Jews had no sacred images, he restored to them the sacred vessels of the Temple which had been looted by Nebuchadnezzar.

2nd Reading - Ephesians 2:4-10

Since the second century this letter has been attributed to Saint Paul, although it was not unknown at that time to attribute authorship to a famous person.

Ephesus was a large seaport city on the western coast of Asia Minor and the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. Saint Paul stayed at Ephesus during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21) and made it his base during his third missionary journey (Acts 19:1-20:1), spending about three years there.

The first three chapters of this letter (from which our reading for today is taken) announce God's great plan, hidden from the beginning of the world, to create a Messianic people of God, a new community of people uniting in Christ both Jew and Gentile and erasing the impenetrable social and religious barriers that had previously divided mankind. It is Saint Paul's privilege to be chosen herald of God, appointed to reveal to men this mystery of God's love.

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us,

The word "rich" is used five times in Ephesians. This stresses the abundance of God's mercy.

"These are the true riches of God's mercy, that even when we did not seek it mercy was made known through His own initiative. ... This is God's love to us, that having made us He did not want us to perish. His reason for making us was the He might love what He had made, seeing that no one hates

his own workmanship. [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

Rather than “saved,” this might better be translated as “made alive” or “brought to life.” The subject here is spiritual death, rather than physical death, as in the story of the prodigal son: “because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found” (Luke 15:24). Salvation is a life-long process, the result of which we learn only at our judgement.

⁶ raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,

There are three verbs used in this discourse: “brought to life (saved),” “raised” and “seated (enthroned).” This is a parallel with Jesus’ own actions in the resurrection and ascension and forcibly brings out the intimate association of the Christian with Christ.

⁷ that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith,

This is not “faith alone.” For Paul, “faith” is not just believing, it is living out that belief. We don’t earn our way to heaven, that is works righteousness (Pelagianism) which is a heresy, but if we don’t live out our faith we can’t attain salvation.

and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;

Faith is a gift which is freely given, but accepted by us at the price of surrender of “self.”

“Paul says this in case the secret thought should steal upon us that ‘if we are not saved by our own works, at least we are saved by our own faith, and so in another way our salvation is of ourselves.’ Thus he added that statement that faith too is not in our own will but in God’s gift. Not that He means to take away free choice from humanity ... but that even this very freedom of choice has God as its author, and all things are to be referred to His generosity, in that He has even allowed us to will the good.” [Saint Jerome (between A.D. 386-387), *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians* 1,2,8-9]

⁹ it is not from works, so no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.

We don’t earn our way into heaven; and once we believe, we don’t get a free ride either – we must live out our faith all the days of our lives. We don’t live out our faith because we want to, but because the grace provided by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit persuades us to. Faith without works is dead (James 2:17).

“By faith man freely commits his entire self to God . . .; before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist Him; he must have the interior help of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 5).

Gospel - John 3:14-21

This part of the gospel is a familiar one: Jesus is talking with Nicodemus. Nicodemus (the name means “conqueror for the people”) was a Pharisee and is called a “ruler of the Jews” in John 3:1; which probably means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. He visited Jesus at night and admitted His divine mission. Our reading today is part of Jesus’ discourse on baptism. Jesus has told Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born “again” (the word is *anōthen*, which also means “from above”), a statement which confuses Nicodemus. This allows Jesus to explain the significance of His mission). To better understand the context, we will begin our reading at verse 10.

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "You are the teacher of Israel and you do not understand this? ¹¹ Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony.

The testimony to which Jesus refers is His testimony and that of John the Baptist.

¹² If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

“It was with reason that He said not: ‘You do not understand,’ but: ‘You do not believe.’ When a person balks and does not readily accept things which it is possible for the mind to receive, he may with reason be accused of stupidity; when he does not accept things which it is not possible to grasp by reason but only by faith, the charge is no longer that of stupidity, but of incredulity” (Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on Saint John*, 27,1).

¹³ No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

This refers to Numbers 21:4-9 where Moses set up the bronze serpent on a pole to cure all who had been bitten by the seraph serpents. In Wisdom 16:6 the bronze serpent is called the “sign of salvation.” Being “lifted up” has a double significance when applied to Christ:

- 1) He is to be exalted (Isaiah 52:13), which is why we have the crucifix today, and
- 2) He must be raised on the cross in order to achieve His resurrection and ascension.

The good thief was the first to experience the saving power of Christ on the cross.

¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

If you truly believe, you will exalt Him and the consequence is eternal life in Him. Jesus demands that we have faith in Him as the first prerequisite to sharing in His love.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,

The familiar sign (John 3:16) which we see held up in the end zone at football games. Although alienated from God, the world is not evil in and of itself; it remains the object of divine compassion. The only explanation that we will ever have of the gift of eternal life (made possible for us in the redemption achieved in Christ) is the incredible love of God for the world. The term “only Son” stresses the gratuity of God’s love – it extends even to this extreme. This was prefigured in Abraham’s offering of Isaac, his “only son” (Genesis 22:2).

so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

There are only two choices: (1) Belief and eternal life or (2) Rejection and destruction. There is no middle ground (see John 6:54).

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The “name” is the being of a person in Jewish theology – if you believe in the name, you believe in all the person represents. The name “Jesus” means “God saves” and Christ was sent into the world to bring eternal life; willful unbelief makes Him the occasion of condemnation and the unbeliever passes judgement upon himself. He who does not believe is already condemned.

¹⁹ And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

The evildoer is the child of darkness and will not come to the light which is Christ. He who approaches the light, on the other hand, is the one who “lives the truth.” To “live the truth” is an Old Testament expression (Genesis 24:49; Ezekiel 18:8) which means to “keep the faith.” Faith brings us out of darkness and into the light; it sets us on the road to salvation. He who does the works that are of God comes to the light.