

God still loves the world

4th Sunday of Lent – Cycle B – March 14, 2021

Readings: 2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23; Eph 2:4-10; Jn 3:14-21.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16)

Prologue: “God so *loved* the *world* that he gave his only Son ...” is arguably one of the most popular lines in the Bible. It is the core, the centre, without which nothing else makes meaning. So, we can reflect upon the two poles: On the one hand, God’s *love*, which is forever firm and faithful, and on the other, the *world* (*kosmos* in John’s Gospel), with its ups, downs, lights and shadows.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading—from the concluding chapter of the Second Book of Chronicles—describes a ‘dark chapter’ in the history of God’s people. The work of the chronicler (described in 1, 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah), focuses more specifically on the deeds and misdeeds of the tribes of Judah (King David’s tribe) and Levi (the priests). On the one hand, while the people are reminded of God’s love and their vocation as God’s elect—specially chosen and gifted with kings and prophets to govern and guide them; on the other hand, their abominations are brought to light. These evildoings and infidelities bring about their downfall, climaxing in the Exile, when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (also called ‘Chaldea’) invaded Palestine, captured Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and took the king and most of the citizens off to Babylon as prisoners of war (597-587 BC)—as described in vv.17-19. However, before any king could destroy all that the people cherished, it was they themselves who slid down a path of self-destruction: “All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem” (v.14). Moreover, “they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising God’s words, and scoffing at his prophets” (v.16). The outcome? Babylonian Exile for almost 70 years as “servants” (v.20). However, in the midst of doom and darkness, the book ends with a ray of light and hope in the form of a so-called ‘pagan king’: Cyrus. Note that God—who is the Lord and Master of human history—still loves the world, and chooses the Persian king Cyrus to rebuild God’s Temple and restore God’s people. Cyrus becomes God’s instrument, freeing the people, telling them, “Whoever is among you of all God’s people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go *up*” (v.23). The “up” is Jerusalem, with its Temple, which will now be their focus.
2. The gospel according to John typically juxtaposes polarities — light vs. darkness; belief vs. unbelief; ascent vs. descent; salvation vs. condemnation and so on — which have both, an obvious meaning and a deeper, spiritual and mystical significance. Today’s gospel passage, which contains Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, opens up with Jesus foretelling his being “lifted up”. At a physical level, it simply refers to Jesus being lifted up on the cross, just as a bronze figure of a serpent was raised by Moses over the stricken Israelites (Num 21:4-9). However, it also refers to the spiritual elevation of Jesus by God, the Father. Jesus will be a concrete sign of God’s love, God’s loving gift of Godself to the world, so to say, to save God’s people. In John’s gospel, the word ‘world’ (Greek, *kosmos*) has layers of meaning: positive, negative and neutral. Of the 185 times that the word appears in the Second Testament, 78 occurrences are in John’s gospel; and, additionally, ‘world’ also appears 24 times in John’s three epistles. The

Johannine Jesus' words: "God so *loved* the *world*" (3:16), are a simple and straight assurance that He, God's Word made flesh (1:14) embodies God's love for our world—with its lights and shadows, trials and triumphs, ups and downs. God loves everything and everyone in the world that God has created; and now, since God is one among us, this love is made manifest and can be multiplied many times over. This basic yet profound statement has many implications for you and for me.

3. If God so loved the world in the time of Jesus, and his ancestors King David and generations right up to our First Parents, despite their sins, scandals, selfishness and stupidity, then, first, God's 'coming down' in love must lead to our 'going up' in love, once again. This 'going up' of the resurrection and ascension happened once in the person of Christ; and must happen time and again, today and forever, in and through the power and presence of Christ's Body, the Church. Secondly, the core message that we, Christians, must be aware of, which was highlighted in Vatican Council II is—"The Church is sent by Christ to reveal and communicate the *love* of God to *all people*" (see *Ad Gentes*, n.10; *Gaudium et Spes*, nn.2,3). Indeed, the catholicity or universality of God's love can neither be confined only to Christians nor naively lead Christians to condemn others. Third, we are told, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (v.17). Let us therefore never classify, critique and condemn others, but be 'lights of love' leading ourselves and others out of darkness towards the light. If at all we are to boast of being Christ's Body, we can only be a 'Body of Love' *sent* to the world which God embraces.

Possible Link of the Psalm and the 2nd Reading to the Theme:

Today's psalm (137) is obviously a reference to the Babylonian Exile. The people review their past excesses and lament their infidelity which has resulted in their captivity. This is chosen in today's liturgy as a response to the first reading. The second reading is from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, to whom he preached the gospel during his third missionary journey (54-57 AD). He preaches Good News to the converts at Ephesus, namely: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great *love* with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (vv.4,5). Paul reminds his people that all this is pure grace, divine gift—unmerited and unconditional: "This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (v.8). Shouldn't that give us cause to rejoice? God loves us with all our sinfulness and imperfections. Yet, God has "created us in Christ Jesus for good works" (v.10), which must always remain as our aim and ambition in life: to go about doing good.

Two Current Concerns:

The Love Concern: "Beloved, since God *loved* us so much, we also ought to *love* one another" (1 Jn 4:11). Do I, do We, as Church, love one another as Christ has loved me and you?

The World Concern: "He was in the *world*, and the *world* was made through him, yet the *world* did not know him" (Jn 1:10). Here, world refers to the human family and cosmos. Do I love Christ and all that God has created in the divine image and likeness?

In Lighter Vein: A woman was said to be receiving divine apparitions. Seeking to validate them, the priest said to her, "When God appears to you next, please ask God to tell you my sins; and that will be proof enough to believe you." A month later, the woman returned to report her experiences to the priest. He asked her: "Did you ask God that question?" She replied, "Yes!" He continued, "And what did God say?" The woman replied, "God said, 'Tell that priest that I've forgotten his sins!'" God doesn't condemn, but loves us that we might love, in return.
