

Let us pray for the Conversion of the World  
& for Peace

**4th Sunday of Lent** – At the heart of Catholicism are the cross (which is bare) and the crucifix (which bears the image of the body of Jesus). Both symbolize and signify the redemptive action of Jesus Christ, each in its own particular way.

Why are the cross and crucifix so important, and so central to our faith? Why, after 2,000 years, has the cross – either w/ or w/out the image of Jesus – Why has it lost none of its fascination and power. The best answer is the simplest: The cross and crucifix are a depiction of how much God loves us; they are a revelation of how much He has always loved us and has desired a positive relationship with us.

All three readings for this weekend bear witness to what we hear in the selection from Ephesians – namely: “*God, Who is rich in mercy, because of the great love He had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ.*” In a nutshell, this passage speaks of God’s action in transforming people. The letter is short, but Chronicles makes up for it. The two Books of Chronicles are not heard much in the 3 year cycle of Sunday readings, and today we have the opportunity of hearing one of the two or three times that a passage from Chronicles is read. What we hear today describes the successive infidelities of the Israelites, from the heads of the priesthood to the most ordinary of people, until there was nothing to distinguish them from other nations. It was only a matter of time before the Temple was destroyed and the people taken into exile. It all looked hopeless – until God took the initiative and restored His people to a new life, with a reconstructed Temple. The real surprise, however was that God’s chosen agent in this was a Gentile, King Cyrus of Persia.

And in the Gospel passage – we’re all familiar with the verse from John 3:16. But how many of us are just as familiar w/ John 3:17? “*God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be save through Him.*” That’s the deeper message I want us all to take home with us this weekend. ***God did not send His Son to condemn us, but to save us!*** Powerful words of hope for each of us. All thru the Bible – Old Testament and New Testament alike – we can find countless examples of how God was always caring for His people, despite their grumbling and sins. From Adam and Eve, to the covenant formed with Noah (rainbow), to Abraham (countless descendants), to Moses and the Israelites (10 Commandments), to Jesus and the “new and eternal covenant” – words we hear in the Eucharistic Prayer. God is always giving us another chance – not just a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance, but chance after chance after chance – much like Francis Thompson’s poem which describes God as

***The Hound from Heaven*** – always searching for us until He finds us and leads us back safely on the right path.

Many of us grew up with a poor image of God. Too many people picture God as a judge ready to condemn us, sitting on a cloud ready to zap us w/ lightning bolts if we are not the best little boys or girls in the world. Jesus paints another picture. God is rich in mercy, God reaches out to us over and over again, even after we choose sin and darkness rather than light and virtue and goodness. We try to hide, but God seeks us out when we hide. God wants to raise us up when we fall down. Being raised up requires admitting I’ve fallen in my faith. Seeing the light requires that we name that vice/ that sin that keeps us from God and the good relationship we should have with one another. And - God is willing to meet us where we are – even in the messiness of everyday human living. Remember – God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world be saved through Him. And elsewhere Jesus openly admits that He came “*that not a soul be lost but that all be saved.*”

Now – don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. Just because Jesus came to save us all doesn’t give us a clear ticket to Heaven. If we reject God’s graces and help; if we deliberately and intentionally commit an evil act and have no intention of repentance or reforming our ways; if we refuse God’s love for us – there will be consequences to pay. We all have been given a free will. And if we choose wrong and refuse God’s graces over proper living and cooperating with God’s graces – well . . .

And so – even though Lent is often thought of as a mournful season – it can be a season of joy as well. Today’s readings make clear why this is so. It is about reflecting more and more deeply on God’s infinite love, directed at our salvation, at our living the life of God to its fullest. Now that’s a cause for joy. It is, of course, a season of penance. But this, as well, can be something positive. We do not try to win God’s favor, or try to persuade God that we deserve His love, because we can never deserve God’s love. Our Lenten penances can draw us more fully into that great mystery of God’s love. We can be full of joy knowing that Father, Son and Spirit – three persons, one God, loves us so much that He goes to great lengths to save us, claim us as His own, and give us eternal life