

FIRST READING: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

A reading from the second Book of Chronicles:

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. 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. 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. Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. 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." In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, 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: "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!"

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6.

***Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!***

By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps.

***Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!***

For there our captors asked of us the lyrics of our songs, And our despoilers urged us to be joyous: "Sing for us the songs of Zion!"

***Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!***

How could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten!

***Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!***

May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember you not, If I place not Jerusalem ahead of my joy.

***Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!***

SECOND READING: Ephesians 2:4-10

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

Brothers and sisters: 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 - by grace you have been saved, raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,

that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast. 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.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John3:14-21

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 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. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent**

One of my classmates always begins his homilies with a joke. Most of my jokes, though funny, are too off color for church. However, based upon today's gospel and in honor of the upcoming St. Patrick's Day, I have one (or two). John's gospel mentions one of the two Irishmen found in biblical texts, "Nick O'Deamus." The other is, "Jesus taught Daly in the temple." I know; this is the real reason I don't often begin a homily with a joke. I do my own writing.

Today's reading from Second Chronicles attempted to do a dangerous thing. It tried to explain why the kingdoms of Israel and Judah fell to invasion and their citizens forced into Diaspora. To say these events happened because of their people's sin may sound good on paper but the reality of the social and political milieu is far more complicated. Human nature has not changed much in the thousands of years since. Countries are still over-run by foreign powers, people displaced by civil uprising and many who seek asylum from the violence. This passage is not about the human suffering that such things cause. With all the talk about people's sins it can seem as if the heart of this passage is judgment. I have to ask by whom? Has God judged God's people? Has the author of Chronicles judged them? Do we, the readers, judge? Perhaps the answer is no. I think the heart of this passage is more than that. This story, as much of scripture, is a reflection of how God's people experienced God's presence as they lived. This passage gives witness to people who believed in God who actively lived and worked among them.

Hardship, difficulty, failure and weakness are part and parcel to our human lives. We are all faced with choices that we must make. Each choice has its own consequence. All of us seek meaning from the events of our lives. We live and do our best only by God's grace. It has been a year that we first recognized a global pandemic; thousands a day are still being infected. A

political crack-down is on-going in Hong Kong. A former policeman is on trial charged with killing George Floyd. Migrant children still seek asylum and entry into the United States. The Catholic bishops caution against receiving one of the vaccines against COVID 19. Protesters against the military coup in Myanmar are being shot. There has been an uprising here in the United States that brought death and destruction. Life is as violent and chaotic as it was in the days of Cyrus, king of Persia.

What good does judgment and blame laying do? If this is our assessment of Second Chronicles how can we possibly deal with the problems we face? The story told in this reading is little different than our own. We may want to know the causes of these events, but that is unlikely. With what are we left? Hopefully we may seek something deeper. If the scriptures offer us God's Good News, can we find some good in current events? As difficult as it may be to see and hear sometimes, in the midst of turmoil, we live by the grace of God. Sometimes God's presence is difficult to recognize. We are faithful believers. We live by faith and through faith we remember God's promises. All it takes is to remember God and God is near.

While living in Diaspora, Jews remained faithful believers and thrived. Only a remnant returned to their native land. The seventy years of exile did not bring all the people back to the homeland. Most chose to remain where they lived. How many generations were born within those seventy years? Why did the majority remain living in exile? Maybe they stopped seeing themselves as exiles and made their home in the lands they now lived. Even today moving from country to country is difficult and we have trains, planes, automobiles and moving vans. As a result of the Jewish Diaspora the faith of Abraham spread throughout the known world. If we focus on judging fellow sinners, we can miss the true gift behind the story. God continued to live among God's people. God continued to work as God chose the pagan king Cyrus to return the remnant to Israel. The people who read the book of Chronicles were those who still lived in pagan countries.

We are all faced with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Over them we have little control. None of us is able to change ourselves much let alone the rest of the world. It's difficult for us to change our own opinions let alone change someone else's. Having admitted this, powerless over our control of life; what does faith offer? We know that God is good even when we are not. God is faithful amid our distractions and temptations. God loves sinners who do not deserve what God freely offers. The Catholic Dictionary defined power in this way, "The magnificent out-pouring of love by the Holy Spirit." I have always found great consolation in that definition. God is not in control as a driver drives a car. God leads through each of us. God's perfection is administered through earthen vessels, namely us. Even as I write this reflection and as you read what I have written we have faced much. Yet here we are, by God's grace. This was also the experience of the Jews who remained living in Diaspora and those who returned to the Promised Land. There has been continuity in human and divine nature for the power of God is love.

In Jesus, God became a human being; being born of flesh and blood. Both Paul and John have pointed this out in the other two scripture passages. A loving God accompanied the Jewish people into exile. God led the remnant home out of love. God remained with God's people no matter where they were. God remains with us too. God saved the human race through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God welcomes and forgives sinners. Why? There is one, solid reason; love. God loved us to life, faith and family. God loves us to eternal life and the Kingdom. God has loved us to this moment, despite the chaos and difficulties that surround us.

What does it mean to be lifted up? A banner, serpent or cross can be held aloft mounted on a pole. A hero can be lifted up on people's shoulders. Airplanes can be lifted up on wings. Their engines rattle our homes. Our spirits can be lifted with a phone call or with a joke. Jesus was lifted up on the cross to die and lifted up from the tomb by rising from the dead. In returning to the Father, Jesus was lifted from this world. We are lifted up when we climb stairs. Through our tears, our deepest feelings lift up from our depths. My morning coffee gave me a lift too. Hope, love, joy and wonder are the means this happens.

Paul wrote that without love, he was a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. In John 3:16, instead of just saying, "God so loved the world," we can place our own name in Jesus' intent. God so loved you and me that he gave his own son to be our savior. We have faith and have received the promise. Both are God's gift to us. God's love is at the basis of our lives, infinite, eternal and unconditional. Part of God's promise, too, is that when our love fails, we can rely on God's love to fill what we lack. Paul added, "Love never fails."

I sleep better in darkness but I can read better in bright light. I don't think that Jesus' comments are about the wattage of light bulbs. What funds our actions? It has felt in the past year, from time to time, like darkness surrounds us. Health issues, politics, and human relationships have been the source of a lot of human suffering. We have all had to face the consequences. How have we managed? What have we chosen? Have we discovered God's presence amid all this? Can we witness God's gifts as they unfold? I suspect that we have seen, chosen and now follow the light.

May God bless and hold you in loving arms.

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March 13-14, 2021