

4th Sunday of Lent (B)  
(2Chronicles 36:14-16.19-23 / John 3:14-21)  
15.03.2015

Dear brothers and sisters,

The liturgy of the fourth Sunday of Lent invites us **to rejoice**. This Sunday is traditionally called “Laetare Sunday” after the first Latin words of the entrance antiphon which we have just sung and which is a verse taken from the prophet Isaiah: “Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast”.

The joy that we are invited to experience is a foretaste of the messianic joy promised by the prophets; it is the joy of Easter in which we were plunged on the day of our baptism. This joy is the reason for which this Sunday liturgy is suffused with light, a light reflected by the colour of the liturgical vestments which is brighter than the traditional purple used during the rest of the Lenten season, and by the flowers that adorn the church. This joy is not a superficial feeling caused by some ephemeral satisfaction (I have won the lotto, for example). This joy is a gift from God, rooted in God’s love for us, a joy that is given to us even in times of suffering, small or great, maybe even at a time of great suffering such as a terminal illness, the death of a loved one or the approach of our own death. We can make our way through the worse trials and yet experience an inner joy, a deep inner peace, rooted in “God’s love for us which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us”.

Christian joy has its source in God’s love for us. If there is one thing we crave for, it is to be loved, to be loved by other human beings, and above all to be loved by God. To bear a heavy burden on our own is a very difficult task. To bear it with the help of someone else is much easier, especially when the one who carries our burden with us is God. We need God’s love at each step of our human adventure. It is not without reason that the gospel verse the most quoted by our evangelical friends is one we heard in today’s gospel: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life”. God loved the world so much! God loves each one of us so much! This is the good news we need to hear and experience! This is the source of our true joy!

Even though we add infidelity to infidelity to God’s covenant of love for us, the Lord does not cease to send messengers to bring us back. We were reminded of this in the reading from the second book of Chronicles. The Lord does not cease to wait for the day when we will come back to him. The Lord’s mercy is without end if we repent and come back to Him.

What does it mean to be loved by God? What are the consequences for our lives here and now? In today’s gospel we heard: “The Son of man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him”. The lifting up of the Son of Man refers to Jesus on the Cross. The passion and death of Jesus on the cross followed by His resurrection is thus seen as the supreme manifestation - the epiphany- of the glory of Christ because it marks the hour of the Lord’s victory over evil. God’s love for us is manifested par excellence on the Cross. By his death on the Cross Jesus reconciles us with the Father and **forgives our sins**, not once, not seven times, but seventy seven times. Jesus forgives us even if we commit always the same sin over and over again, if we constantly fall into the same trap.

Jesus takes away the weight and the shame of our sins. By his death on the Cross and his resurrection Jesus **sets us free** not only from the multifaceted fear of death we meet everyday, but also **from** our own **death itself**.

The recalling of the bronze serpent raised up by Moses is meaningful too. The Lord had sent venomous serpents to the Hebrews as punishment for sin. Those who had been bitten by them would not die if they looked upon the serpent on the pole made by Moses at the Lord's request. The point being made is that if we are to have life, we must raise our eyes to the crucified one. The evocation of the bronze serpent reminds us that the death of Jesus on the Cross is also a **source of healing** for us. Our healing is a grace received from the Lord as a fruit of his passion and death on the Cross and glorious resurrection. It is said that the Hebrews had to look at a serpent in order to be healed from a bite by a serpent. If we are to receive God's healing grace in our lives, we must first identify our illness and put it into words in order to be cured. We have to face our illness straight on and call it by its name so that we may be freed from it. This is nothing other than the first admission required of someone on the well-known 12 steps programme: the beginning of the process of healing is to be able to say in presence of others: I am an addict, an alcoholic or whatever. Yes, it is very important for us to be able to put our sins into words in order to receive the grace of the Lord's healing.

The source of our joy is in God's love for us manifested in Jesus. In Him our sins are forgiven, death is no longer a meaningless end but a passage toward fullness of life. There is always a path of healing open in front of us. As we continue our Lenten pilgrimage, let us take time to receive God's love for us and the gift of his joy, a joy that the world cannot give to us, a joy that the world cannot take away from us: the joy to know ourselves to be loved with respect and constancy.

Amen!