

Lent is a time for penance

4th Sunday of Lent (March 30): (R3) John 3:14-21; (R1) 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; (R2) Ephesians 2:4-10.

The theme of next Sunday's readings is God's mercy. God is faithful, we are faithless. Regardless, God is rich in mercy.

The Book of Chronicles is the last book of the Bible in the Jewish canon. It is a theological reflection on the history of God's people after they had lived through the purifying experience of the Exile in Babylon. It was written sometime between 538 and 400 B.C. Chronicles explains why the Temple had been destroyed and the land made desolate.

Basically, it was because of the greed of God's people. They wanted money so badly that they broke the Sabbath. So God punished them by a Sabbath of Sabbaths (7 times 7 or 49 years in exile — from 587 when the Temple was destroyed to 538 when Cyrus permitted the Jews to return home and rebuild the Temple in 517 B.C.)

God's love is always creative. During the Babylonian Captivity, under the influence of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, the synagogue was born, the Scriptures were edited and the Sabbath became a holy day again.

In the second reading, Paul tells us "God is rich in mercy." Mercy means having a heart for the miseries of others. No misery is so great as sin. So God sent his Son to save us from this misery. Paul repeats that this was done, not through any merits of ours but freely out of God's sheer goodness. God's love was the motive force behind the Incarnation and the Redemption. Sometimes Christians sound as if God had to be pacified, persuaded to love man. God loves us with an eternal love. He never changes. All change is and has to be in us. He sent his Son, not for his sake, but for ours.

The Greek word which the New Testament uses for love is agape. Agape means to love another even if



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A word for Sunday

he is undeserving, unlovable, repulsive. The other Greek word for love is eros. Eros connotes a love that is evoked by the attractiveness of the object. Nowhere does the New Testament use this word! God's love is unmerited; it is a grace — his graciousness toward us.

In "The Hound of Heaven," Francis Thompson has God ask fugitive man who would love him except God:

"Human love needs human merit-ing:

"How hast thou merited —
"Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?"

But God's great love requires a personal response of faith, like confession. The resulting relationship will be eternal life begun here and now.

In the Gospel our Lord refers to the bronze serpent. In the Book of Numbers (1:9) we are told that God punished the Hebrews for murmuring against him and Moses by sending poisonous snakes among them. They immediately repented and begged Moses to intercede for them. Moses did and God ordered him to make a bronze serpent and hang it on a cross where all could see it. Whoever looked on it with sorrow for their sins and trust in God's mercy would be healed of their snake bite.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he, too, had to be lifted upon a cross, like the bronze serpent. Just as there was no venom in the bronze serpent, so there was no venom in him. Therefore he can heal all who are bitten by the serpent, Satan, and are poisoned by sin if they would turn to him in confession. Only those will stay away who don't want to be saved. "Everyone who practices evil hates the light and won't come near it because he does not want to change. Such people love the darkness more than the light."

Lent is an invitation to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel" as the priest says when giving ashes on Ash Wednesday.

Turn away from sin and turn to Christ hanging on the cross, like the bronze serpent; turn to the sacrament of reconciliation, which drives out the poison of sin and restores one to spiritual health.

We might say that the message of mid-Lent readings is, "Go to confession now before Easter."

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 31
Isaiah 65:17-21
Psalms 102:1-6, 11-12A, 13B
John 3:43-51

Tuesday, April 1
Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12
Psalms 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9
John 5:1-10

Wednesday, April 2
Isaiah 49:8-15
Psalms 145:8-9, 13C, 14, 17, 18
John 5:17-30

Thursday, April 3
Ezekiel 12:7-14
Psalms 106:19, 23
John 5:31-47

Friday, April 4
Wisdom 2:1A, 10-22
Psalms 144:1, 21, 23
John 7:12, 19, 25-30

Saturday, April 5
Jeremiah 17:16-20
Psalms 77:2-3, 9B, 12
John 7:40-53

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