

the Sunday Readings



*But those who do what is true come to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds
have been done in God. (John 3 : 21)*

4th Sunday in Lent (b)

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*hints of hope*¹

introduction

Faith means welcoming the love of God in Christ, which saves us and gives us life that lasts. This reality must be freely accepted. To reject it, is to condemn ourselves to preferring darkness to light. *'Christ as the light of God'* is one of the images most used by John the evangelist. Darkness, for John, imaged the world's rejection of God's love. For candidates of an Easter baptism, today is time for a Second Scrutiny.² Our world will be ordered in new ways. But only if the God who searches our hearts, can be the transforming God of surprising statements of faith; of honest grieving for an old world that is ending; and of astonishing thanksgiving for a new world that is surely coming to be.

first reading: 2 Chronicles 36 : 14 – 16, 19 – 23³ [the fall of Jerusalem & Cyrus proclaims liberty for exiles]

All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem.(14) The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place,(15) but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.(16) . . . They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels.(19) He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia,(20) to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.(21) In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus or Persia so that he sent a herald through out all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict:(22) "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the Earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

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- 1 Front Cover: Jesus and Nicodemus by Crijn Hendricksz, 1616–1645. The first time Nicodemus is mentioned, he is identified as a Pharisee who comes to see Jesus *"at night"*. John places this meeting shortly after the cleansing of the Temple and links it to the signs which Jesus performed in Jerusalem during the Passover.
 - 2 The believing community acts so that the candidate's already expressed desire, *'to see with the eyes of faith'*, is supported by the community's prayer. This applies as much to baptismal candidates as it applies to all who seek a renewal of commitment to their baptismal life. Life in the spirit of Jesus, depends on the offer in the liturgy of another world of possibility and permission, presided over by another authority. It is the world *'visioned'* in credos recited; in laments resolved; in songs of thanksgiving sung.
 - 3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

*Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him!
Let him go up!"(23)*

In the Israelite order of text, this is the last paragraph of the Hebrew bible. It's a summary statement that Israelite history has come to a sorry end. The Chronicler was preoccupied with the break-up of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 b.c.e., which marked the failure of David's enterprise. The royal house of Judah and its supportive urban infrastructure is judged to be doomed. The ruling house, the priesthood and the people, all sought to secure their future through the institutions of monarchy and temple. But they failed to respond to the Lord God's expectations. They were unwilling to repent their ways and re-order public life around covenant-keeping (vv.14-15). Therefore, the royal house is sure to perish according to the Chronicler (v.16). The time for God's mercy has passed. Judah now had to deal with the ruler of the Babylonians, or Chaldeans, whom the writer considers have been sent by God (v.17).

The Babylonian ruler's lack of mercy parallel's the exhaustion of God's mercy. A period of harshness now followed. It came in the form of a ruthless occupation by the Babylonian army (v.19). The Chronicler doesn't have much to say about this new situation because the ending of the old order is so massive and overwhelming. The mercy of God warned in the past that Judah must change or die (v.15). But when God's mercy is rejected everything is ended. The entire network of meaning and values, symbolised by the temple furnishings, is confiscated and transported away. *'The glory of the Lord God'* has departed. Only after the destructive force of the Babylonian ruler is spent, is there any hint of hope about the future. The Chronicler reaffirms the Jeremiah tradition (vv.21-22) that justified the catastrophe of 587 and now moves beyond Jeremiah. Jeremiah's text is cited, to anticipate a new fulfillment that lies beyond the harsh judgement, towards a new act of God's mercy (v.22).

It's Cyrus, the Persian ruler, who makes a new beginning possible. When *'the spirit of the Lord God'* stirs, there are possibilities beyond the collapse of the old world. The text moves beyond the absence of God's mercy and the monarchy, to show a new element of a much under-stated mercy for those who have acted without mercy. This hint of newness, is offered so people will find hope despite the system, whatever it might be. It shows God's freedom to use foreign rulers like the kings of Babylon and Persia, to act as the Lord's agents. Through a Persian ruler, Cyrus, God's mercy is revealed to those to whom God wills it shown;⁴ even to the inheritors of the house of David – which had proved dysfunctional and had so recently been rejected!

4 Cf. Ex.33:19

response: Psalm 137 : 1 – 6

[Lament over the destruction of Jerusalem]

*By the rivers of Babylon -
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.(1)
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.(2)
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."(3)
How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?(4)
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!"(5)
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.(6)*

The singers refuse to sing the people's sacred songs in an alien land despite demands of their Babylonian captors (vv.1–4). They swear an oath by what is most dear to a musician; hands and tongue; to exalt Jerusalem always (vv.5–6).⁵ There are no trade-offs to substitute for the loss of the holy City. No other place is its equivalent. The lament acts out and communicates to the next generation, the yearning that belongs to every displaced Israelite.

The psalm draws its power and authority from the rejection of the present arrangements, which are unacceptable. The *'ending of exile'* and *'homecoming'* are central in the vision of the speakers. The realisation of such a dream may seem remote – but it isn't in doubt. They affirm that there will be a homecoming and that there will be peace, justice and freedom. The song expresses this hope, against the enormous odds. It expresses what those who have been around longer have learned; that regrettably, matters won't necessarily be righted immediately. It is a song for the long-haul. It is for those not able to see change, but who know that hope for change can be sustained.⁶

The Lord God's reality is linked to the holy City of promise and hope. Life is still centred on Jerusalem – even if the temple lies in ashes! While the temple may be in ruins, it's still the temple. The memory doesn't fit well with the reality of destruction. But this memory is sufficient for the speakers' defiant hope. This is

5 The *Psalm* ends with a prayer that the old enemies of Jerusalem, Edom and Babylon, be destroyed. The speakers are concerned and convinced that their future; and the future of all humankind; is somehow linked to Jerusalem.

6 The speakers don't despair. There is a reliance here on drawing power and authority from the vision of a secure peace, justice and freedom, in the future homecoming. In the meantime, the speakers' torment is compounded by being forced to sing Israelite songs. Such a scandal was savagely repeated in the death camp of Treblinka.

not the religion of neurotics. It's a counter-cultural stand; an act of asserting life which isn't controlled by dominant Babylon. The speakers have access to an overriding meaning to their lives, that the dominant exploiters of Babylon, lack.

second reading: Ephesians 2 : 4 – 10

[from death to life]

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us(4) even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – (5) and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,(6) so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.(7) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – (8) not the result of works, so that no one may boast.(9) For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.(10)

'The aggressively liberating ONE' (the Lord God), initiates and completes the rescue of entrapped peoples. The liberation comes through the richness of God's mercy and the abundance of God's love (v.4). The recipients of Paul's letter have experienced, in their redemption from transgressions and sins, the effect of Christ's supremacy over the power of the devil. Both Jew and Gentile have experienced, through Christ, God's free gift of salvation that already marks them for a future heavenly destiny (vv.4–7).

The language: '*dead*', '*raised us up, and seated us . . . in the heavens*', closely parallels Jesus' own passion and Easter experience. The terms in *verses* 8–9 describe salvation in the way Paul elsewhere speaks of justification by grace, through faith; the gift of God – not from works.⁷ Christians are a newly created people in Christ, fashioned by God for a life of goodness (v.10). Paul warns his readers/listeners against thinking they have somehow merited this liberation through their own efforts or worth (v.7). Rather, redemption is God's free gift, which will be expressed by the good living of believers and is part of a larger divine plan. The good life is not something for which an individual can take the credit.

'*Liberation won, in Christ*' (vv.7,10) is translated into a different life in community. The resulting '*good work*' demonstrates God's graciousness, freedom and new life, won for believers through Christ's exaltation. Those who are liberated, share this sense that life is a gift of God. It's not the result of human initiative. Gratitude is the appropriate response to this experience of salvation. It means doing what believers were created to do – good works. This is, '*to be our way of life*' (v.10). Gratitude is not the same as being passive. It means speaking

⁷ Cf. *Ga.2:16–21; Rm.3:24–28*.

the truth with neighbour;⁸ working so as to have something to share with the needy,⁹ and acting with kindness and forgiveness.¹⁰ These are performed as 'good work' because the doer recognises that in themselves these 'works' are the gifts of God. The reality of God's saving activity in Christ is celebrated and praised. Thanksgiving and reverence for the Gift-Giver is the appropriate response.

gospel reading: John 3 : 14 – 21

[Nicodemus visits Jesus by night]

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (14) that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (15) "For 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. (16) "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (17) Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (18) And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. (19) For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. (20) But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (21)

Jesus was talking about change; the new birth he wanted here on Earth. It seems that because of their religious concerns (about heaven) the religious leaders don't understand things of the Earth, that were happening in front of their eyes. They don't understand how to change the world 'here and now'. Jesus drew a parallel between the *Son of man* and *Moses* (v.15). Moses 'lifted up' a snake in the desert and all who looked on it lived.¹¹ When serpents had bitten the Israelites in the desert, Moses had raised up the bronze figure of a serpent. Everyone who looked at it was cured and lived.

In John *eternal life* (v.15) doesn't mean life in heaven. It means life we can lead now, here on Earth.¹² John writes in one of his letters: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have *eternal life*".¹³ Such life presupposes a triumph over the power of death. The Bible speaks of a communion of all, with all things held in common. For that we need this new birth. Paul says we must cast off *the old self (the old society)* and clothe ourselves in the *new (society)* with no distinctions between Israelite and Greek,

8 See Ep.4:25ff.

9 *Ibid.* v.28

10 *Ibid.* v.32

11 [v.14] *lifted up*: In Nm.21:9 Moses simply mounted a serpent upon a pole. John here substitutes a verb implying glorification. Jesus, exalted to glory at his cross and resurrection, represents healing for all.

12 [v.15] *eternal life*: used here for the first time in John, stressing quality of life rather than duration.

13 1 Jn.5:13

masters and slaves, males and females.¹⁴ When people love each other – there is a community of love – and that's heaven. Where there are no divisions; no selfishness; where there is no deceit – that's where heaven is! That's heaven. That's eternal life (v.16) – that's glory!¹⁵

Judgement already exists in this life (vv.17-18).¹⁶ The one who doesn't believe in Christ is the one who doesn't love. Jesus speaking of this judgement says: “*I was hungry and you gave me no food*”.¹⁷ Jesus says here that oppressors don't want their exploitations uncovered (vv.19-20). They love the darkness and want people kept in ignorance. They hate the light and make religion itself serve to cover up reality. Jesus may have gone on speaking of light and darkness because Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish Supreme Council. There was a clash between the people of the Council and Jesus himself (v.21). The clash was like the clash between darkness and light. Nicodemus receives light and afterwards he defends Jesus in that Council.¹⁸

for sharing:¹⁹

- *The fall of Jerusalem and Cyrus proclaims liberty for the exiles. Comment on 2 Chronicles 36 : 14 – 16*

14 Cf. Col. 3:10-11

15 It seems that humanity is like a complete organism. Humanity, as a single body, has eternal life but only individuals who are united with humanity (those who love) share in the life of this body. They do not perish. They may die individually. Only those who separate from this body (the enemies of unity) perish.

16 [vv.17–18] *Condemn*: The Greek root means both judgment and condemnation. Jesus' purpose is to save, but his coming provokes.

[v.19] *judgment*; some condemn themselves by turning from the light. Judgement is not only future but is partially realised here and now.

17 Mt.25:42

18 Cf. Jn.7:50-52: – Workers for social change and economic democracy would like what is being said here. Jesus isn't talking about God somewhere in heaven. He talks about God in the action of empowering love. To see God who is part of what people are doing is to see Love. The God that Jesus presents is in what people are doing. If we want to look for God, we must look to the liberating practice of people who lovingly empower others.

19 *Lectio Divina*: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'

- *From death to life. Comment on Ephesians 2 : 4 – 10.*
- *Nicodemus visits Jesus by night. Comment on John 3 : 14 – 21*

prayer: ²⁰

*O God, rich in mercy, You so loved the world
that, when we were dead in our sins,
You sent Your only Son for our deliverance.
Lifted up from the Earth, he is light and life;
exalted upon the cross, he is truth and salvation.
Raise us up with Christ
and make us rich in good works,
that we may walk as children of light
toward the paschal feast of heaven.
We ask this through Christ,
our deliverance and hope,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty God, now and always. Amen*

review: ²¹

Repentance can easily be misconstrued, as though it were a matter of reconstructing the past. We imagine that if we could get back to the innocence of childhood all would be perfect - back to the first strength of younger years. "Happy that early days when I shined in my Angel-infancy" (Andrew Marvel). But repentance is not about languishing for the past and its supposed innocence. It is about allowing God to shape the future. Christian life is about going into the future wherever God takes us, rather than hankering for some momentary point in the past when, for our point of view, everything seemed nice. Evil is indeed a reality but we should recognise that the pleasantly good prospect of recreating the past can be itself a most alluring form of sin. The future to which God draws us will bear the sign of the crucified Lord and there we would rather not go.

- Eugene O'Sullivan O.P. Celebrating Reconciliation (1982) p.33

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²⁰ The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

²¹ the review: – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, that provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.