

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – B

(2 Chr. 36:14-17, 19-23; Ephes. 2:4-10; Jn. 3:14-21)

Excerpts from Pope Benedict XVI - 26 March 2006

by Father Charles Fillion

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Brothers and sisters, this Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally more joyous, than the penitential atmosphere of this holy season. We started our celebration by saying the Entrance Antiphon: “Rejoice [...] Be joyful [...] exult [...]”. We might ask ourselves: but why should we rejoice? One reason, of course, is the approach of Easter. The expectation of Easter gives us a foretaste of the joy of the encounter with the Risen Christ.

The deepest reason, however, lies in the message offered by the biblical readings. They remind us that despite our unworthiness, God’s infinite mercy is destined for us. God loves us in a way that we might call “persistent” and enfolds us in his **inexhaustible** tenderness. This is what already emerges from the First Reading from the Book of Chronicles. The sacred author offers us a concise and meaningful interpretation of the history of the Chosen People, who suffered God’s punishment as a consequence of their rebellious behaviour: the temple was destroyed **and** the people in exile no longer had a land; it truly seemed that God had forgotten them.

Then, they saw that God, through punishment, pursues a plan of mercy. The destruction of the Holy City and the temple was to be an exile that would move the people’s hearts and bring them back to their God so that they might know him more deeply. And then the Lord used of a pagan, King Cyrus of Persia, to set Israel free. From anger to mercy of the Lord, love triumphs in the end, for God is love. Can we grasp from the memory of those distant events a message valid for all times, including our own?

In thinking of the past centuries, we can see that God continues to love us even when he punishes us. Even when God’s plans pass through trial and punishment, they always aim **at** an outcome of mercy and forgiveness. This is what the Apostle Paul confirmed for us in the Second Reading, recalling that “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2: 4-5). To express this reality of salvation, we heard in the Gospel passage: “God so loved the world that he gave his Only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3: 16). As we know, that “giving” on the part of the Father had a dramatic development: it even went to the point of the sacrifice of the Son on the Cross. Jesus’ entire mission in history is an eloquent sign of God’s love.

In this Lenten Season, our meditation must be centred on the Cross. In it we contemplate the glory of the Lord that shines out in the martyred body of Jesus. God’s greatness becomes visible precisely in this total gift of himself. It is

the glory of the Crucified One that every Christian is called to understand, live and bear **witness to** with his life. The Cross - the giving of himself on the part of the Son of God - is the definitive “sign” par excellence given to us so that we might understand the truth about humanity and the truth about God: we have all been created and redeemed by a God who sacrificed his only Son out of love. How should we respond to this radical love of the Lord?

The Gospel presents to us a person by the name of Nicodemus. He is attracted by the Lord’s words and example, but hesitates to take the leap of faith because he was fearful of others. How many people also in our time are in search of God, in search of Jesus and of his Church, in search of divine mercy, and are waiting for a “sign” that will touch their minds and their hearts! The Evangelist reminds us that the only “sign” is Jesus raised on the Cross: Jesus who died and rose is the absolutely sufficient sign. Through him we can understand the truth about life and obtain salvation. This is the principal proclamation of the Church, which remains unchanged down the ages.

The Christian faith, therefore, is not an **ideology** but a personal encounter with the Crucified and Risen Christ. From this experience, flows a new way of thinking and acting: an existence marked by love is born, as the saints testify. To understand and accept God’s merciful love: may this be your commitment, first of all in your families and then in every neighbourhood. Continue on the path on which you have set out, striving to make your parish a true family in which fidelity to the Word of God and the Church’s Tradition may become, day after day, more and more your rule of life.

Like I said last Sunday, this parish is very important. In 2025, we will have a big celebration. It will be to 200th birthday of Msgr. Noël Ritchot. So, yes, we do have a reason to “Rejoice ... Be joyful... exult ...”. Till then, be eager to witness to the love of God, the merciful Father. That love is the true secret of Christian joy to which this Sunday, invites us. We turn to Mary, “Mother of holy joy”, and ask her to help us deepen the reasons for our faith, so that, as today’s liturgy urges us, renewed in the spirit and with a joyful heart, we may respond to the eternal and boundless love of God.

As we turn to Saint Joseph on March 19th, may he also help us in the silence of our life, reminding us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play a unique role in the history of salvation. May this special Year “Amoris Laetitia Family” starting March 19th, help people “experience the Gospel of the family as a joy that fills hearts and lives”.