

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Year B: 2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23; Ps 137; Eph 2:4-10; Jn 3:14-21

March 14, 2021

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Today, on this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we hear in the Gospel some of the most famous and moving words recorded in Sacred Scripture: *“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.”* In these words, we are told the whole reason why Christ came into the world and died on the Cross – so that we might not perish, but have eternal life.

Ever since the Fall, at the dawn of creation, mankind and the world had been waiting for this offer of eternal life to be restored. Throughout the Old Testament, God was reaching out to mankind by sending prophets in an effort to establish friendship and good relations. As we heard in the first reading, *“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”*

Time and time again, God’s compassion was met by man’s hardness of heart. And yet, in spite of this rejection of God’s messengers, God kept reaching out to the fallen world. He refused to allow mankind’s sinfulness get the last word. And He did not wait for the world to repent and make reparation, before He made possible our salvation. This is one of the main themes from the Scriptures for this Sunday’s Mass. God was proactive in His effort to save us – He was the One who initiated the effort to be reconciled with us. As we heard in the second reading, *“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 ..., 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”* (Eph 2:4-6).

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul makes this same point even more emphatically, when he writes: *“But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life”* (Rom 5:8-10).

It is good for our souls to ponder this great truth, especially as part of our observance of Lent, when we recall what Christ did to save us. God was not to blame in the broken relationship with mankind. He was not at fault in any way, and yet *He* was the One who made the effort to be reconciled with us. This is what we mean by the *gratuitousness* and *goodness* of God. God gives what is *undeserved*. The world did nothing to deserve its redemption – in fact, the world had repeatedly rejected God’s gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation. And yet, God sent His Son into the world not “*to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*”

What does this mean for us? Well, first, it means that we should not fail to take advantage of the salvation that God is offering us. It’s true that we have been redeemed, but we have not yet been saved. That happens only if we choose freely to believe in Christ and live as He taught. As we heard in the Gospel, “*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.*”

It’s true that God did not wait for the human race to earn or merit its redemption, but He does now require our individual cooperation to receive His gift of eternal life. No one is saved who does not want to be saved. It may be that some people who have never heard of Christ accept His offer of eternal life unknowingly, through a good conscience (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 16), but God certainly prefers that people be saved by conscious and explicit faith in Christ. This is why the Church labors to preach and spread the Gospel – to increase the chances of salvation and to populate Heaven. God redeemed the world without our cooperation, but He now asks for our cooperation in order to be saved.

The other lesson for us on this Sunday is that, if God reconciled us to Himself before we deserved it, we should likewise forgive others, even before they ask for our forgiveness. If we want to be like God, we can’t wait for an apology. It may be that we can’t restore a broken relationship all by ourselves, especially if we are not at fault, but we can at least do our part by forgiving others from the heart. This is a way that we can imitate God’s goodness – by forgiving others before they ask for forgiveness or apologize, and by giving others what is *undeserved*. “*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.*”