

ECHOING GOD'S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
Fourth Sunday of Lent (Cycle B)
March 10, 2024

SCRIPTURES READINGS:

2 Chronicles 36:14-17	God used Gentiles to change the hearts of his people.
Ephesians 2:4-10	We have been brought to life in Christ.
John 3:14-21	God so loved the world that he gave his Son.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

John:

Nicodemus has come to Jesus “in the night” to speak with him about the meaning of the law. Some suggest that “in the night” means that Nicodemus is still in the “darkness of sin,” not yet open to the “light” of faith and salvation. Others think that “in the night” identifies him as a serious scholar of the word of God, whose habit it was to ponder the meanings of the Scriptures during the night hours.

A “leader” among the Jews probably refers to Nicodemus’ position as a member of the ruling council, the *Sanhedrin*, which was charged with the conduct of the civic affairs of the city and of the state.

Jesus was neither a recognized teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures nor an acknowledged scholar in the Law of Moses. That Nicodemus should come to him to discuss the meaning of the word of God does indicate that, at least privately, Nicodemus recognized Jesus’ extraordinary competence in spiritual matters. It is as if a Supreme Court justice were to come to consult a self-educated author whose name has been in the news recently. At this point in John’s Gospel, the words “lifted up” most likely do not refer to the future crucifixion of Jesus by which he will be glorified. It is only much later in the Gospel that John brings together the “lifting up” on the cross with the “hour” to which Jesus must come into the glory of the Father. The reference here is to Numbers 21:9-11, where the people are invited to see the power and the mercy of God in their very affliction. Their suffering and dying is what causes them to turn toward God and to find salvation.

Son of Man: John takes special care to show that the total fulfillment of God’s love for humanity is to be found in the ultimate surrender of Jesus to death on a cross. Thus, all that is human has been accepted and absorbed so that the whole human race can now be taken up into the glory of salvation in Christ the Lord. Redemption is not like a price paid for sinners by one who is not a sinner but rather the identification of sinners with the one who is sinless.

Chronicles:

The Books of Chronicles bring to a close the canon of the Hebrew Bible. They have been referred to as *annals* or the written account of events in the life of the nation. Some authors refer to these books as the ‘leftovers’ of Hebrew writings. Surely, they are intended as historical records. But they are history *with a purpose*. The authors seek to justify and to glorify the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty. The covenant with King David seems to hold precedence over any other prior covenant. Exodus is not the defining event in the life of the people. Becoming a significant nation in the world, under its own king, is the center of attention in these writings. The Jewish people needed a strong sense of their identity as they struggled to reestablish their nation, their Temple, and their self-definition after the great Exile in Babylon. The focus of these writings, therefore, directs the nation to see the hand and purpose of God in their trials and in their successes.

Ephesians:

The Letter to the Ephesians contains a most striking theology of the unity between Christ and those who believe in him. Whatever happens to Christ seems to happen at the same time to all who believe in him. *He* has died; *they* have died with him. *He* has been raised to life; *they* have been raised with him. *He* has been glorified at the right hand of the Father; *they*, too, are destined for that glory. The use of the words *we* and *you* may refer to *Jewish Christians* and *Gentile Christians*, respectively. Although, in this letter, there does not seem ever to have been a conflict between these two groups of early Christians.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Share some of your personal experience of pain and suffering that led you to a deeper encounter with Christ the Lord. Why do you think God chose to seek you out in suffering rather than in success? Do you believe that people are more likely to be open to God’s initiative when they have suffered a loss of some kind? Discuss the role of suffering and pain in the life of a Christian.

2. Does Christ want us to accept all physical pain and not seek relief in any medication when we are sick or dying? Do you believe God might want us to accept some medical relief in order to direct more energy toward healing rather than just blindly enduring pain? Is there not merit also in having a clear head in order to praise God more effectively rather than letting pain distract us completely from God’s love?

3. In what way can Lenten penances be seen as a voluntary participation in the cross and suffering of Christ? Can we not choose to share with Christ in his sacrificial suffering and dying? What value can be found in such a sharing with Christ? Can the sufferings of an individual Christian be joined to Christ’s and offered for the benefit of others in the “communion of saints”?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Visit with someone who is chronically ill. Ask that person to tell you about the meaning of suffering. Share with that person what your experience of suffering has meant to you.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Lord, come with the healing touch of your love to relieve the pain and ease the suffering of your servants who are ill. Come with the power you used while among us in the flesh to show that God loves us.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Facing up to the truth of our lives empowers us to overcome the evil that is present to all of us. Jesus said that the truth would set us free. Lies keep us in bondage. Falsehood can be and often is so subtle that it goes unnoticed. We have the ability to deceive ourselves and to become convinced that a lie is really the truth. Only when we face up to the truth can we be really free.

In the examination of conscience, we look at the truth about ourselves. In the Catholic tradition, we have the experience of looking at the truth in ourselves periodically as we prepare to celebrate the sacrament of penance. We present ourselves totally stripped of all pretenses and of all self-deceptions before God as we look over the condition of our souls. We pray that God may help us know and acknowledge the condition in which we find ourselves. We ask God to help us see the truth about ourselves. God always answers that kind of prayer. We know in a flash the sinfulness of our hearts. We remember the times when we have been selfish and mean, the times when we have been cruel and vengeful, the times when we have failed in our loyalty to God. We look sin in the face in order to overcome it. A sin we have not faced up to cannot be repented. A sin we have not regretted in a real way still holds us in its bond. The *catechism* contains an amazingly up-to-date consideration of the *Examination of Conscience* to be done before celebrating the sacrament of penance:

The reception of this sacrament (Penance) ought to be prepared for by an examination of conscience made in the light of the Word of God. The passages best suited for this can be found in the moral catechesis of the Gospels and the apostolic letters, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the apostolic teachings. (Matthew 5-7; Romans 12-15; 1 Corinthians 12-13; Galatians 5; Ephesians 4-6, etc.).

The word of God in the Holy Bible is the place to find guidance for the examination of conscience.

The next time we prepare for the confession of our sins, we need to take out our Bible and read the passages suggested above. That way, we will be preparing our repentance and forgiveness according to the word of God as indicated in the *catechism*. There is no hiding from God when his word confronts us with the truth.

See: The Catechism of the Catholic Church: #1454

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