

GOSPEL

JOHN 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.

No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he has refused to believe in the name of God’s only Son. On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God.’

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, called “*laetare*”, that is, “rejoice”, because this is the opening antiphon of the Eucharistic liturgy that invites us to joy: “Rejoice, Jerusalem” — thus, it is a call to joy — “Be joyful, all who were in mourning”. This is how the Mass begins. What is the reason for this joy? The reason is God’s great love for mankind, as today’s Gospel passage tells us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”.

These words, spoken by Jesus during the encounter with Nicodemus, summarize a theme that lies at the centre of the Christian message: even when the situation seems desperate, God intervenes, offering man salvation and joy. Indeed, God does not remain apart from us, but enters the history of mankind; he “meddles” in our life; he enters, in order to animate it with his grace and save it.

We are called to listen to this message, rejecting the temptation to value our own self-confidence, to think we can do without God, to claim absolute freedom from him and from his Words. When we find the courage to recognize ourselves for what we are — this takes courage! — we realize we are people called to take our weaknesses and our limitations into account. So it may happen that we are gripped by anguish, by anxiety about the future, by fear of illness and death.

This explains why many people, searching for a way out, sometimes take dangerous shortcuts such as, for example, the path of drugs or that of superstition or of disastrous magic rituals.

It is good to know our limitations and our weaknesses; we must be aware of them, however, not in order to despair, but to offer them to the Lord. And he helps us on the path of healing; he takes us by the hand, and never abandons us, never!

God is with us and for this reason I “rejoice”; we “rejoice” today: “Rejoice, Jerusalem”, [the antiphon] says, because God is with us. And we have the true and great hope in God the Father rich in mercy, who gave us his Son to save us, and this is our joy. We also have many sorrows, but, when we are true Christians, there is the hope that is a small joy which grows and gives us certainty.

We must not become disheartened when we see our limitations, our sins, our weakness: God is near; Jesus is on the Cross to heal us. This is God’s love. To look at the Cross and tell ourselves within: “God loves me”. It is true, there are these limitations, these weaknesses, these sins, but he is greater than the limitations and the weaknesses and the sins. Do not forget this: God is greater than our weaknesses, than our infidelities, than our sins. And let us take the Lord by the hand; let us look to the Crucifix and go forward.

May Mary, Mother of Mercy, place in our hearts the certainty that we are loved by God. May she be close to us

in the moments in which we feel alone, when we are tempted to surrender to life’s difficulties. May she convey to us the sentiments of her Son Jesus, so that our Lenten journey may become an experience of forgiveness, of welcome and of charity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ‘God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son’. How does this phrase challenge or support your experience of God’s presence in and desire for you and your life?
- In what ways do you ‘prefer darkness to light’? These are areas to bring before the mercy and love of God, asking for his healing.
- It is through the cross that we are brought out of our darkness into the light of God’s love and truth. In what large or small ways have you experienced this truth in your life - enabling you to find new life out of suffering and weakness?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.