

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Fourth Sunday of Lent

First reading:

(2 Chronicles 36.14-16, 19-23)

The Broken Covenant

In the first readings for Sundays in Lent, we have worked through the promising but tragic history of Israel, a history of promises by God, of broken promises and fresh starts by Israel. We have seen this in the stories of the covenant with Noah, Abraham's obedient trust, the commands given to Moses to keep Israel faithful to the Lord. Now we come to the final disaster, inevitably brought on by Israel's repeated failure and infidelity.

This whole history of Israel was composed with the background theme that fidelity brought prosperity and that a healing punishment was the inevitable consequence of desertion of the Lord.

In this final chapter, the historian looks back at the ultimate disaster of Exile in Babylon, and the return of a renewed Israel to the Holy City. Even then the promised blessing of God seemed long delayed. They were an oppressed little community, huddled round Jerusalem, harassed by their neighbours and dominated by one foreign power after another. After some years they did summon up energy and resources to rebuild the Temple, but they continued to yearn for the decisive intervention of God that would enable them to serve their Lord in freedom and total dedication.

Question:

Is material prosperity really a blessing

Second reading:

(Ephesians 2.4-10)

The Grace of God

The Letter to the Ephesians is usually considered to be the first commentary and reflection on Paul rather than from the Apostle's own hand, reflecting on the salvation won by Christ.

After the record in the first reading of the repeated failures of Israel, the message, twice repeated, that salvation is by grace alone, is particularly apt.

Grace here means not a substance poured into our souls to provide some sort of salvific energy, but is the unmerited favour and choice by God. It is a personal relationship rather than a material, rather even than a spiritual gift. God has smiled on each of us and invited us into his friendship. In the light of this gift of friendship, we are strengthened and encouraged to serve him, so that this gift of his friendship becomes an ever stronger and more important element in our lives. God shows us his love and we respond. So he shows us even greater love.

But the greatest gift of all is his Son and the salvation, the new life won for us by Christ.

Question:

What are the difficulties in having a personal relationship with God?

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Gospel:

(John 3.14-21)

Nicodemus

After Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, comes this reflection on his visit. Is it Jesus' reflection or the evangelist's? The text does not make it clear.

Throughout the gospel of John, people are coming to Jesus and judging themselves by their reactions to Jesus. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son. In his turn, the Son does not judge, but we judge ourselves by our reaction to him.

So, at the wedding at Cana the disciples believe in him and see his glory. In the Temple, the Jews refuse belief and are condemned. Then comes Nicodemus in secret and in fear. He is sitting on the fence, afraid of the Pharisees, but by the time of the burial he has decided for Jesus. After Nicodemus comes the Samaritan woman, cheeky and unbelieving at first, but won over by Jesus' playful persistence. And so on: the Jews on one side, the man healed at the Pool of Bethzatha on the other; the Jews on one side, the man blind from birth on the other.

The decision is ours too: when confronted by Jesus, do we come to the light that our deeds may be known, or do we shun the light?

Question:

How can we be afraid of the light?
