4th Sunday of Lent Year C

For the first few weeks of Lent, the Old Testament readings have focused on God's initiative in the early part of salvation history. He made a covenant with the world through Noah, then He promised to bless the world through Abraham and He revealed the law to Israel through Moses. Because of His covenant, God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and gave them a kingdom in the Promised Land. As a sign of His love and blessing, He established His presence in the Temple at Jerusalem. God poured out his blessings upon Israel in abundance. Now we read of the sad response of Israel.

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

14. In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the Lord's temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem. Just as virtue attracts virtue, so sin attracts sin, like a magnet. We are told that these sins were committed by the whole nation: the leaders, the priests and the people. At one point God had Jeremiah stand in the doorway of the temple and rebuke the worshippers for coming there after making shady business deals all week. Manasseh put pagan altars and a fertility pole in the temple, sacrificed his own infant son, consulted mediums, practiced sorcery and had homosexual prostitutes in the temple. Many of these "infidelities" involved ritual sexual expression of a type that was common in Baal worship and others included the sacrifice of children on the flames. Satan, the prince of devils was called "Beelzebul," which means "Lord Baal" and these were not merely false gods, they were devils! When we recognize just how hideous the covenant violations of the people of Israel were, the fact that God used other peoples to chasten them is not surprising.

15. 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. God's mercy is shown in that He did not chasten the people right away, but rather, sent messengers "early and often" to try to get the Israelites to change their behavior. God is far more merciful than the covenant required. Finally, at some point, it was no longer a mercy for the sinner to be allowed to persist in sin. God's mercy then corrects and chastises.

16. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the Lord against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy.
Condemnation came to God's people because they kept refusing to believe in the messengers sent to them. (Jesus says the same thing in the gospel. He is the last in a long line of God's messengers, and he, too, is rejected by the blindest of the blind—those who will not see.)

19. Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all the palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects.

20. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, led the people astray and was resolved not to turn back to the Lord. He also profaned the Lord's temple and drew down the severest punishment of all the kings of the period: there was a general slaughter, the temple was destroyed, Jerusalem was laid waste, and the survivors were deported.

21. All this was to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah: "Until the land has retrieved its lost Sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled."
God's punishment is explained as a justly severe sentence imposed on the worst crimes of all: unfaithfulness and idolatry. Seventy years of enforced exile (This is the Babylonian Captivity.) must be endured because Judah abandoned the Sabbath (seventh day) rest. This punishment was foretold in Jeremiah 25:11. This was also promised in Leviticus 26 for if the people observed the Sabbaths as a covenant sign, they would have rest and blessing in the land. But if they failed to observe the Sabbaths, God would reclaim the Sabbaths by destruction. Israel had bound herself to the

Covenant and to its consequences. (But even the punishment is aimed at correcting.) After the punishment of the exile, God blessed Israel with another season of mercy. Lent is our season of mercy, a chance to see how well we have done at observing the requirements of the New Covenant(1)….It is good to remind ourselves that it is a grave sin to deliberately miss Mass on Sunday. We are also to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, the performance of the works of mercy, and the appropriate relaxation of mind and body.
22. In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: These verses really belong to Ezr 1:1-3, but were repeated here so that the ending of the Hebrew Bible is optimistic.
23. "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, (The previous house of God, Solomon's temple, was destroyed as the people were carried off.) which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, Cyrus set Israel free to go up to Jerusalem. As a result of Cyrus' obedience of God, the house of worship was restored and the people had the place for worship that they had ignored before their captivity. and may his God be with him." In this final paragraph, a pagan king becomes Judah's savior –a profound embarrassment for this nation of the covenant. It is also a tribute to the power of God to bring good out of an evil situation by employing even the most unlikely means. There is no limit to God's love for his people, and no limits to which God will not go to demonstrate that love.

This reading has been chosen to complement the gospel in which we hear Jesus explain to Nicodemus that condemnation comes only to those who WILL NOT see the light.

Ephesians 2:4-10

The first three chapters of this letter (from which our reading for today is taken) announce God's great plan, hidden from the beginning of the world, to create a Messianic people of God, a new community of people uniting in Christ both Jew and Gentile and erasing the impenetrable social and religious barriers that had previously divided mankind. It is St. Paul's privilege to be chosen herald of God, appointed to reveal to men this mystery of God's love.

Brothers and sisters:
4. God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, There is no English word for "mercy" as used here. "Hesed" is the Hebrew word and it means solidity, steadfastness, loyalty, dependableness and also worthy of faith. When a person does something for another that he is not obliged to do, that is "hesed." The word is associated with deliverance and peace and pity and saving deeds. It signifies a special power of Love which prevails over sin and infidelity. It is a pity of the heart….John Paul II has written an encyclical that has its title taken from this scripture: "Rich in Mercy." This is how he sums up the biblical teaching on mercy: "The Lord loves Israel with the love of a special choosing, much like the love of a spouse and for this reason he pardons its sins and even its infidelities and betrayals. When he finds repentance and true conversion, he brings his people back to grace. In the preaching of the prophets mercy signifies a special power of love, which prevails over the sin and infidelity of the chosen people."
5. even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ—by grace you have been saved—Just as a dead person cannot bring himself back to life, so those who are dead through sin cannot obtain grace by their own effort. Only Christ offers us that new life that ends in eternal happiness in heaven.

6. raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, Paul refers to this as if it were an accomplished fact. He reasons that Jesus Christ is our head and we form one body with him and therefore we share in the head's condition. St. Augustine says that "even though our body is not yet there, our hope is already placed there."
7. that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
8. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;
9. it is not from works, so no one may boast. It is the teaching of the Catholic Church that salvation is purely a gift. To think that one could earn their way to heaven is a form of the sin of presumption. However, we do owe God a RESPONSE to the gift of salvation. We must try to show our acceptance of the gift by working in love. Scripture makes clear that the real reception of the gift entails a change of life that God's gift of grace makes possible (for it is the movement of the Holy Spirit that moves the heart and opens the eyes of the mind.) Matthew 25, which gives Christ's description of the final judgment, shows that whether or not we continually respond in love to the gift of faith makes a great deal of difference as to our place for eternity, when Christ comes as Judge. Catholic life consists of appreciation for the gift of salvation, expressed in prayer and fasting and love of neighbor lived out in almsgiving and works of justice and mercy.
10. For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance that we should live in them. We are a new creation in Baptism. The deeds and works that proceed from this grace are an indication of the genuineness of our faith. James 2:17 says that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Christian Tradition has always taught that the fruits of faith are a proof of its vitality.

John 3:14-21

This passage is part of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus has been teaching Nicodemus about the necessity of being born again, and now this section explains that this rebirth can only happen through the death and glorification of the Son of Man.

Jesus said to Nicodemus: Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin who visited Jesus secretly at night. He spoke in the council on behalf of Jesus, observing that the law demanded that the accused be given a hearing, and he also took part in the burial of Jesus, bringing a large and costly quantity of spices.

14. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, The bronze serpent, which Moses set up on a pole, was established by God to cure those who had been bitten by the poisonous serpents in the desert. Jesus compares this with his Crucifixion, to show the value of his being raised up on the Cross: those who look on him with faith can obtain salvation. As the brass serpent had the appearance of a serpent and yet lacked its venom, so too, when Christ would be lifted up upon the bars of the Cross, he would have the appearance of a sinner and yet be without sin. As all who looked upon the brass serpent had been healed of the bite of the serpent, so all who looked upon Christ with love and faith would be healed of the bite of the serpent of evil. We could say that the good thief was the first to experience the saving power of Christ on the Cross: he saw the crucified Jesus, the King of Israel, the Messiah, and was immediately promised that he would be in Paradise that very day….It is interesting that the bronze serpent, along with the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubim, were images ordained or permitted by God in the Old Testament. so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
15. so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. This belief of which our Lord speaks is not just intellectual acceptance of the truths he has taught: it involves recognizing him as the Son of God, sharing his very life and surrendering ourselves out of love and therefore becoming like

him. This faith is a gift of God and like the Apostles, we should ask the Lord to "increase our faith!" While faith is a supernatural, free gift, it is also a VIRTUE, a good HABIT, which a person can practice and thereby develop: so the Christian, who already has the divine gift of faith, needs with the help of grace to make explicit acts of faith in order to make this virtue grow

16. 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. This is the only explanation that we shall ever have of the gift of eternal life made possible for us in the redemption achieved in Christ: it is *the incredible love of God for the world!* The Roman Missal gives us more food for thought on this passage: "How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he gained so great a Redeemer!"…Fulton J. Sheen commented: "It was not enough that Jesus would come as a great teacher and a great example. It was more important for Him to fulfill the purpose of the coming, to redeem man from sin while in the likeness of human flesh. Teachers change men by their lives; our Blessed Lord would change men by His death. The poison of hate, sensuality, and envy, which is in the hearts of men, could not be healed simply by wise exhortations and social reforms. The wages of sin is DEATH, and therefore it was to be by DEATH that sin would be atoned for."…This "eternal life" refers to both the divine quality of new life in Christ as well as its duration.

17. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. The use of the term "world" is most important for this evangelist since he means not a place that can be confined by geographical boundaries, but one that is determined by those who do NOT follow the Lord, who do NOT follow his way or truth. The difficulty for the believer is that despite his faith in God, he must still live in the world, and yet not be a part of it.

18. 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. The choice is clearly ours: to believe or not to believe! Unbelief is a form of rebellion that puts offenders outside the safety of the covenant. To reject the Son of God is to reject the light of faith while preferring spiritual darkness, death, and disinheritance. It is told that a visitor was being shown round an art gallery by one of the attendants. In that gallery there were certain masterpieces beyond all price, possessions of eternal beauty and unquestioned genius. At the end of the tour the visitor said: "Well, I don't think much of your old pictures." The attendant answered quietly: "Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial, but those who look at them are." If, when a man is confronted with Jesus, his soul goes out in a thrill to that wonder and beauty, that man is on the way to salvation. But if, when he is confronted with Jesus, a man sees nothing lovely and he does not believe, then he stands condemned. His reaction has condemned him.

19. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. A major theme in the writings of John is that of light and seeing as symbolic of belief or faith. People preferred to leave their works in the darkness because the light would call for a change and they did not want to change.

20. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. Walking into the light can be uncomfortable, because you will be as brightly illuminated by the light as everything else that the light falls upon. ENTERING THE LIGHT REQUIRES HUMILITY. Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night in order to see, but without the willingness to be seen, at least until the time of the burial of Christ.

21. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God. Whoever "lives the truth" is an Old Testament expression that means "keeps the faith."

Some of the information for this commentary was taken from: (1)"The Commentary Notes Of Tim Gray," (2) "The Navarre Bible: Chronicles-Maccabees, " (3) "The Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (4) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 2006" by Martin Connell, (5) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 2003" by Aelred R. Rosser, (6) "The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles," (7) "Dictionary Of The Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (8) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 1997" by Lawrence E. Mick, (9) "The Bread Of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (10) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (11) "The Navarre Bible: St. John," (12) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (13) "Life Of Christ" by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, (14) "The Gospel Of John Vol. 1" by William Barclay, and (15) The St. Paul Center For Biblical Theology Online Founded By Dr. Scott Hahn.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.