

# 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year B

Fr. Samuel Springuel

10 March, 2024

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** 2 Chronicles 36:14–16,19–23

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 137:1–2,3,4–5,6

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** Ephesians 2:4–10

**Gospel** John 3:14–21

Rejoice! In case my rose colored chasuble didn't give it away, today is Latare Sunday; so called because the introductory antiphon for today's Mass begins "Latare Jerusalem" in Latin. And for those whose Latin is a bit rusty, and who can't guess where this is going, "latare" means "rejoice." It is, indeed, a command: "Jerusalem, you should be rejoicing!" But here we are, just past the midway point of Lent. Is Lent not a penitential season? Should we not be reflecting on sin, and our sins in particular? How can we be commanded to rejoice under these circumstances? Are we to be masochists who derive pleasure from our own pain?

Most assuredly not, but nevertheless we are commanded to rejoice here in the middle of Lent. All this reflecting on our sins, these penitential practices by which we try to make up for our sins, they can, if we are not careful, drive us to despair. We can become so focused on our failings that we lose sight of the bigger picture. Yes, we should be sorrowful for our failings, our sins, and seek to make restitution, to perform penance. And yes, our penances are often inadequate; they do not really fix the things which we have broken in our sins. We need salvation that we cannot ourselves provide. And this is what the command to rejoice calls us to remember: God wants to save us. In the words of the Gospel, "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." God loves you; He loves me. And his Son has come not to condemn us, but to save us. That salvation we need? It has been given to us!

Now, this does not mean that our sin is overlooked. God punishes sin so that we might learn to recognize it. We are, after all, prone to fooling ourselves. We tell ourselves that we act only out of the best of motives. That the harm we do was not intended and therefore we are not to blame for it. We are good people who would not knowingly commit wrong. We might be ignorant, or misguided, but not malicious. We come up with thousands of excuses, myriads of rationalizations, to preserve our self-image, our false self-image. And so we do *need* God to punish us from time to time.

Any parent can tell you that children need to be punished from time to time. Not because the parents don't love them, but indeed because they do. These punishments cannot be arbitrary or random; they should not be done in anger or to make the parent feel better. Punishments such as those are not done for

love. But if a child is to learn right from wrong, if they are to learn discipline, self-control, and all the other virtues we so desire to impart to our children, then some form of punishment will be part of the program.

So it is with God. He must discipline us like the children we so often are, so that we may learn to recognize our failings. This is the message of the first reading: God punishes Judah, his chosen people, because of their failings. We too are deserving of that punishment. But even in punishment, we must look to the future. God didn't just punish Judah, didn't just send them into exile. He also sent Cyrus to restore them, to bring them back to the land and rebuild the Temple. Punishment is never the end of the story when it comes to God.

This is why we are commanded to rejoice here in the middle of Lent. Yes, we spend much of Lent focussing on what we have done wrong, and on the little disciplines we can use to prevent those wrongs from repeating themselves. This only makes sense, however, because God is merciful; he grants us grace. He stands ready to grant forgiveness and to reconcile us to himself, if only we will let him.

As Catholics, this is made most manifest in the Sacrament of Penance. This is why the Church admonishes us to make use of this Sacrament and receive reconciliation most especially during Lent.

It's been almost 5 years since I was ordained, and in that time I can't tell you the number of confessions that I've heard. Mostly because I don't keep track. Forgetting confessions makes it easier to keep the Seal of the Confessional. The thing that regularly surprises me, though, is the number of people who want to rush the Sacrament. They come in and start, "Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been so long since my last confession and in that time I have...". It's like they want to do the whole thing in one breath. Further, that isn't even the beginning of the Sacrament. They've skipped straight to step 4 and I have to slow them down, back them up, and bring them to the place where they can start to focus on God and his presence in that moment. As with almost everything the Church does, the Sacrament of Penance begins with an invocation of the Sign of the Cross, a naming of the Triune God by whose power what is about to take place is possible. To this the priest responds, "May God, who has shone his light in our hearts grant that you may truly know your sins and his mercy." The knowledge of our sins, into which so many want to barrel headlong, must be paired with a knowledge of God's mercy. We don't confess our sins to beat ourselves up. We confess our sins because God has promised us mercy and forgiveness. This is the message of our second reading: mercy, grace, salvation, eternal life. These are the gifts of God that Jesus brought to us.

This is the purpose of the Sacrament of Penance, the reason we rejoice in the middle of Lent. As one of the alternate dismissals for the Sacrament puts it, "Blessed are they whose iniquity is forgiven and whose sin is blotted out. Be glad, brother, be glad, sister, and rejoice in the Lord." Penance, whether it be Lenten or Sacramental, serves to restore us to right relation with God. God sent his Son as a sign of mercy, not condemnation. Let us acknowledge our sins, our struggles, for we are in the midst of them. But let us also rejoice, for we have been promised great things, the greatest reward of all: the grace of God that leads to everlasting life.