

4th SUNDAY OF LENT (Given at the Cathedral of St. Matthew) March 15, 2015

Here we are at week four, midway on our Lenten journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. His apostles knew, and Jesus knew too, there were death threats from some of the Jewish leaders if he went there. Jesus insisted on going anyway, and finally Thomas said to the others, "Let us go along to die with him." They went, but they did not die with him. They ran away confronted with the brutality of crucifixion, and not able to comprehend and believe in the resurrection Jesus had foretold.

We have no excuse to run away from the cross because we know the sequel. Jesus endured that terrible death and rose from the dead in order to pay the full price for our sins and restore us to peace with a loving God. As we heard in St. John's gospel, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life. God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's enemies, turning them into one's friends by the demonstration of such selfless love. Why would anyone go after false gods when Jesus has revealed to us God the Father's love for us?

We were reminded in the first reading about Israel being seduced by the idols of the nations around them. They scoffed at the messengers God sent them, and did not keep the commandments, causing God to become very angry. God is jealous for the chosen people with whom he has made a covenant. To bring them to their senses, he lets them be punished for their sins, but again and again he holds back from their complete destruction and gives them a new chance to return to him with all their heart.

When we look at our own lives with our alternating sinning and repenting, we might see in ourselves a microcosm of Israel's history. People come to confession and sadly admit that they have to confess the same sins again and again. That plight can lead either to despairing of God's mercy or presumption of it by making no effort to use the spiritual weapons of warfare we have been given to change.

Pope Francis has just recently announced an extraordinary Jubilee Year focusing on mercy, starting December 8th. Some people were already criticizing the Pope for emphasizing mercy over morals, complaining that he is not firm enough about holding up the moral teachings of the church. He has good precedents. Pope Francis points us to a God who is like the father of the prodigal son. He watched every day for his son to come home, ran to meet him when he saw him coming, and held a party for his coming home alive. Peter once asked Jesus how many times he should forgive sinners. Jesus answered not just seven times, but seventy times seven times. In other words, don't count. We just heard in the second reading Paul telling the Ephesians, "God is rich in mercy. Because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ Jesus when we were dead in our sins."

It was out of compassion that God sent the prophets and finally his own Son to warn us of the punishments that come from not keeping the commandments. Yet fear of punishment is not enough to stop us from sinning. It is God's unconditional, enduring love that pierces our hard hearts leading us to repentance and conversion. We are truly given new life when we surrender

to the power of Jesus' sacrifice restoring us to peace with God, peace within ourselves and union with the whole body of Christ, the church. Then we can begin to keep the commandments as a way of a loving response to God's love.

We pray in the psalms, Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love, and his mercy, endure forever. If his love and mercy endures forever, then there is no reason to despair. There is no sin that the blood shed on the cross by the Son of God cannot forgive, except the refusal to accept the gift of his having made satisfaction for us all. Jesus let himself be lifted up on the cross to draw all to himself. When we unite ourselves with his most acceptable sacrifice here on the altar, he lifts us up to and draws us closer to sharing in his life of glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the one God who is worthy of our praise, honor, thanksgiving, and obedience now and forever. AMEN.