

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2024

My dear friends in Christ, this Fourth Sunday of Lent is called Lætare (Rejoice) Sunday, from the first words of today's liturgy. As on Gaudete Sunday in Advent, rose-colored vestments may replace violet, and flowers may grace the altar, symbolizing the Church's joy in anticipation of the Resurrection of Our Lord.

The central theme of today's readings is that our salvation is the free gift of a merciful God, given to us sinners through Jesus, the Son of God. The readings stress God's mercy and compassion and remind us of the great love, kindness, and grace extended to us in Christ Jesus.

In the first reading, taken from the Second Book of Chronicles, we see the compassion and patience of God. God chose Cyrus the Great, a pagan conqueror, to become the instrument of His mercy to, and salvation of, His chosen people who are in Babylonia exile. In the Responsorial Psalm (Ps 137), the Psalmist voices the pain of exile that the captives of Judah suffered. In the second reading, St. Paul tells us that God is so rich in mercy that He has granted us eternal salvation and eternal life as a

free gift through Christ Jesus. Today's Gospel provides a theme that parallels the Gospel, but on a much higher level. Jesus, the Son of God, becomes the agent of God's salvation, not just for one sinful nation but for the sinfulness of the whole world. Through John 3:16, the Gospel teaches us that God has expressed His love, mercy, and compassion for us by giving His Only Son for our salvation.

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

I wonder sometimes how we see ourselves. What does each of our “default positions” look like? Put another way, what is the real you? What is the real me? Maybe you've never really thought about it. Or maybe you have and you don't like what you see, don't like what you consider to be the “real” you. I know I don't.

Is the real me a selfish person?

Is the real me vindictive?

Is the real me petty?

Is the real me deceitful?

Is the real me unforgiving?

Is the real me ungrateful?

Is the real me unkind?

Is the real me unloving?

I'm certainly all those things at times. But is that the REAL me? Or is my default position - the particular "settings" that God has made me to embody, something entirely different? In other words does God and I see me in the same way, or in different ways?

How we answer those questions matters.

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You see, if we see ourselves as basically bad and corrupt and unlovable, then the spiritual life and the season of Lent in particular becomes an uphill struggle to try to win God's love, to try to convince him to love us and be good to us and help us and not condemn us. I don't have to tell you that, that sort of self-image lends itself to a life lived in fear of God, a life lived to avoid God's wrath, a life in which we are doomed unless we can convince God otherwise.

But if we see ourselves in a much different light, illuminated by what our faith teaches, that God created us out of love and in his image, that he loves us beyond our wildest imagination, and that nothing we ever do can change that, then our lives become something entirely different, filled with meaning and beauty and hope. And the spiritual life (and Lent in particular) becomes all about allowing God's grace to restore us to the way he created us to be, all about embracing and rediscovering the beautiful person each of us was, is, and can be.

My dear people of God, can we see ourselves as God sees us? And can we let him forgive us and comfort us and transform us anew - rebooting us to the way he made each us, each with our own uniqueness and gifts (individual "settings" if you will)? And we need not be afraid. The real you and the real me are more incredible and God-like than we can think of or imagine.

Short Story

A man found a cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared; he sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could

go no farther. Then the man decided to help the butterfly, so he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time. Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It was never able to fly. What this man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that, the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were nature's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon. Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life.