

My dear brothers and sisters, today's Gospel reading consists of two parts. The first part is the final sentence of Jesus' reply to Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who approached **Jesus at night**. Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus as someone who had come from God and seemed that Nicodemus wanted to be Jesus' follower. Jesus told Nicodemus that one must be born anew; or he cannot see the Kingdom of God (Jn.3:3). The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus that followed was about the meaning of this phrase (born again). Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus, but there was no animosity in the questions he posed to Jesus. In the course of their conversation, Jesus referred to an incident reported in the Old Testament. When the Israelites grumbled against the Lord during their journey in the desert, God sent venomous serpents to punish them for their lack of faith. The Israelites repented and asked Moses to pray for them. The Lord heard Moses' prayer and instructed him to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole (Num.21:6-7). All who had been bitten by a serpent and then looked upon the bronze serpent were cured. By recalling this story, Jesus alludes to the salvation that would be accomplished through **his death and Resurrection**. Again, the Gospel passage takes this incident, where the Israelites found salvation and life by directly confronting what was afflicting them, as a type of the coming "lifting up" of the Son of Man upon the cross. Those who will "look upon" **the Crucified Jesus with the eyes of faith**, seeing him there as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29), will find eternal life.

The second part of today's Gospel is a theological reflection on Jesus' words to Nicodemus. The Gospel of John is known for this kind of reflection offered within the narrative. The words of the Evangelist are in continuity with the words of the prologue to John's Gospel. In these reflections, John elaborates on a number of themes that are found in his Gospel: light and darkness, belief and disbelief, good and evil, salvation and condemnation. In the Gospel, we find an observation about human sinfulness. Jesus **is the light that has come into the world, but people preferred the darkness** (Jn.3:19). We wish to keep our sins hidden, even from God. Jesus has come into the world to reveal our sins so that they may be forgiven. This is the Good News; it is the reason for our rejoicing in this season of Lent and throughout our lives. At this midpoint of Lent what the readings seem to have in common is an insistence that God's ultimate response to human wrongdoing is salvific, rather than judgmental and destructive.

The First Reading, 2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23, deals with the writing after the Exile; the Chronicler attributes this national calamity, especially the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, to the exhaustion of divine patience at the infidelities of the people. But destruction is not the end of the story. In accordance with what the prophet Jeremiah had foretold, Cyrus, king of Persia, conqueror of the Babylonians who had destroyed the Temple, sees himself as deputed by the Lord to rebuild it. He invites all surviving worshippers to "go up" there for worship. The prophet's role is chiefly interpretive. The prophet helps people understand why a calamity has come or is shortly to come upon them. Then, appealing to the nature of Israel's God, the prophet gives hope for future rescue when suffering has run its course. The Book of Chronicles thus ends on the happy note that is salvation and restoration, rather than punishment.

In the Second Reading, St. Paul centered on God's love and generosity. The letter is in fact an extended reflection on Paul's part upon the "mystery" that lay at the heart of his vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles. The mystery is the inclusion of the nations of the world in the riches of salvation that had previously seemed reserved for Israel alone. In the saving death of Jesus, God addressed not just Israel's sinfulness but also that of the entire world. The raising of Christ from the dead has given to the entire human race the possibility, appropriated through faith, of sharing in eternal life and so arriving at the fullness of salvation. The Gentile believers in Ephesus, along with Paul himself and all believers throughout the world, represent a kind of beachhead of this world-embracing salvation, which is entirely the undeserved gift of God.

In conclusion dear friends, the Gospel has made it abundantly clear that God loves us so much that is why He sent Jesus to save us. God's whole intent in our regard, from beginning to end, is to save and communicate eternal life through the outpouring of love that the cross also represents. Lent invites us to be aware of how sin separates us from God. Return is possible through Christ, who was lifted up on the cross, died and rose again, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. Let us turn away from our sins and come back to Christ. Let us use this period of grace to amend our lives and walk in God's direction so that our Lenten observances of prayer, fasting and almsgiving may be acceptable to God. Amen!