Homily: 4th Sunday of Lent 2018

*2 Chr. 36: 14-16, 19-23; Eph. 2: 4-10 & Jn. 3: 14-21*

As I said at the beginning of Mass, today is *Laetare* *Sunday*, the 4th Sunday of Lent, the midpoint of our Lenten journey towards Easter. I am sure that you all know that this name – Laetare Sunday – comes from the opening words of the Latin Introit traditionally sung on this day, an Introit which has probably been used since the 9th century, using a text from Isaiah 66: *Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast* (Is.66: 10-11). Every Sunday in Lent is a “holiday” in a sense, a day of rejoicing and not fasting, a break from the Lenten rigours, but this theme of “rejoicing” has traditionally always been associated with this Sunday. Being the midpoint, with three Sundays behind us and three still to come (at least if you include Easter Sunday itself), there is a definite switch of focus – even the Opening Prayer at Mass this morning concentrates less on repentance and penitence, and more on our *“[hastening] toward the solemn celebrations to come”*. We look forward with rejoicing to the coming feast of Easter.

But do we? Do we *really* look forward to Easter with joy today? Or are we just so tired at this stage of term – and especially when this term has been so cold and bleak – that Easter does not yet seem to be on our horizon? Or perhaps Lent and Easter have just become rather routine – part of our annual ritual, part of the weave of our lives, but not something we have given too much thought to, let alone felt much emotional response to. Or perhaps we actually dread the approach of Easter. I must admit personally that that in a sense is where I am. Many of you will know that we have a large retreat at Ampleforth each year for the Triduum, a retreat which needs a huge amount of preparation, and I am nowhere near ready for it yet! Indeed, it was only last Friday that I suddenly realised that I hadn’t given any thought at all as to how I am going to decorate this year’s Paschal Candle – one of my jobs in the monastery – and that I will only have four days to do it when I finally get home!

Lest this all become rather gloomy for a Laetare Sunday, and no matter where we are on the emotional spectrum between numbness and panic, I think today’s readings have a lot to say to all of us about why we should indeed rejoice. At first sight, they seem a rather random selection – and I have been puzzling over that since I first started thinking about this homily last Tuesday. But actually, I think they do have something of a common theme. And that common theme is the “shock” of salvation. Let me try to explain.

In our first reading from the book of Chronicles, the narrator laconically describes the total failure of Israel. Despite all that he had done for them, the people and leaders of Israel have utterly abandoned God – disdaining not only him but his servants the prophets, those whom he had sent to try to soften their hard-heartedness. And so the Chronicler concludes “until at last... there was no further remedy” – and God’s wrath and punishment blazes forth. On the first Sunday of Lent, we heard of God’s promise to Noah that he would never again wipe out all flesh by the Flood – but now there comes a second purging of Israel, not now by water, but by fire and the sword. Jerusalem is devastated, even the Temple destroyed, the land laid waste and the people dragged into exile in Babylon. The whole “project”, the whole of God’s plan for Israel, seems to be at an end. And then comes the “shock” of salvation. Seemingly out of nowhere, God speaks to Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, a king who has himself ruthlessly overthrown the Babylonians, and tells *him* to rebuild the Temple. Nothing could have prepared Israel for this sudden reversal. Nothing Israel has done has merited this change of fate. It is a pure gift from God.

We see very much the same in Paul’s words to the Christians of Ephesus: *“when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life in Christ – not by anything of your own, but by a gift of God; not by anything you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God’s work of art”*. Just as with Israel, God now shares the shockingly gratuitous gift of salvation with the pagans, with the Gentiles, purely because *he loved us with so much love*. Nothing could have prepared us for this.

And again we see the same in the Gospel. In that great speech to Nicodemus, Jesus foretells his own crucifixion, his own “being lifted up”, just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a standard, to bring healing to the suffering people of the Exodus assailed by the fiery serpents in the desert. But again, Jesus’ words are deeply shocking: *For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that, through him, the world might be saved*. God would have been well within his rights to condemn the world, well within his rights to send his Son as Judge to bring a well-deserved punishment upon us for our wickedness. That is, after all, what our sinfulness – then as now – actually deserves in justice. But God chooses a different way. Not only does he not destroy us in our sin, but actually sends his Son to take our sins upon himself, sends him to die – the just for the unjust – to pay our ransom with his own blood.

We are all so very familiar with all this that we no longer find it shocking – but I think we should. We have become so very accustomed to seeing the Crucifix that it no longer shocks us – but I think it should. The stark reality not only of God’s *plan* for our salvation but its being put into effect in the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is utterly overwhelming – if only we can see it for what it truly is: the most perfect and gratuitous act of love there has ever been and ever will be. And it is an act of love towards each one of us – for you and for me, here and now and forever. And if that is not a cause for us to rejoice, I don’t know what is!

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## Bidding Prayers: Laetare Sunday

*Intro: Fr Oswald*

D: Let us pray for the Church: May all who profess the name of Christian be ever mindful of the riches of God’s mercy, and – themselves knowing what they have received – be generous in sharing their faith and hope with others.

Lord, in your mercy...

 Let us pray for those preparing to receive the sacraments this Easter: May they all be blessed in abundance, and come to know more fully the depth of God’s love.

Lord, in your mercy...

 Let us pray for all those in need: For those who suffer the effects of war and conflict; for those who suffer hunger, both abroad and here at home; for those who are displaced from their homes, and for those who cannot find work. May God, who has given us so much, inspire us to give what help we can.

Lord, in your mercy...

 Let us pray for our community here at St Benet’s: For the Master and Betty, for our fellows and teachers, for our students and for the monastic community. May the coming vacation and these last days of Lent be a time of refreshment for us all, and bring us to the joy of Easter.

Lord, in your mercy...

On this day when we especially remember the gift of motherhood, let us pray to God in thanksgiving for our own mothers, both living and departed. And let us ask Mary, Mother of the Church to pray with us and for us, as we say: *Hail Mary...*