

## Fourth Sunday of Lent B - Laetare Sunday, We are making our way out of the exile of Lent and into the full daylight of Easter.

March 14, 2021.

This Sunday is "**Laetare Sunday**" [this Sunday entrance antiphon of the liturgy begins with the word "laetare" which means "rejoice." (Isaiah 66:10) ]. "**Laetare Jerusalem**" ("**Rejoice, O Jerusalem**"). Midway through our Lenten journey towards Christ's Passion and Resurrection, the Church invites us to rejoice. Today's rose-colored vestments symbolize this rejoicing. In one sense, it is strange to rejoice right in the middle of this penitential season, when we are letting the Holy Spirit remind us of all our sins and selfish tendencies. But if we go a little deeper, it makes perfect sense. Christian joy isn't based merely on human motives, something so unreliable, unstable and temporary because we are flawed, we fail, we betray. Rather it is based on God, who loves us thoroughly and powerfully right in the midst of our misery. He didn't make us earn his love; he gave it to us as a free gift: "**God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...**" That gift made us citizens of heaven, even though right now we are living here on earth. And with that gift he also gave us a promise: **our friendship with Christ will bring meaning and partial joy to our lives here on earth, but it will bring us into everlasting joy in heaven.** If we accept God's gift of friendship with Christ, what St Paul calls "grace," then we will have "eternal life" - guaranteed. Whoever lives in friendship with Christ lives a fruitful and meaningful life here on earth. Whoever dies with that friendship still intact will enter into the eternal adventure of life with God forever in heaven. If that's not a reason for us to rejoice, I don't know what is.

Why did the Church choose this rose-colored vestment to symbolize our Christian joy? Why not brilliant yellow or bright orange? It's because rose-colour captures both sides of Christian joy: the partial joy we have now, and the overflowing, complete joy we will experience in heaven. Rose-colored vestments are like the pale colour of the horizon when the dark night just begins to brighten as the sun starts to rise, **so the love of God in Christ pierces the darkness of sin and sends the shadows of evil fleeing the bright light of eternal day.** As in Daniel O'Donnell's song I Watch the Sunrise "***I watch the sunrise lighting the sky casting its shadows near. And on this morning bright though it be I feel those shadows near me. But you are always close to me following all my ways. May I be always close to you following all your ways Lord***"

Life here on earth, in the Church, is life in the dawn of salvation, but the full light of day only comes later. Some darkness still lingers; we still have our crosses to bear as we journey with patience and faith towards our heavenly homeland. We know we are on the right road when we follow Christ, and that God will guide and strengthen us, and so we can still rejoice. This was also the experience of ancient Israelites during their exile in Babylon, which we heard about in the first reading (2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23). That experience is a pattern of human history as a whole. The ancient Israel's unfaithfulness with God and their capture by their enemies, slavery and exile is a reflection of the human family being unfaithful to God in the Garden of Eden and conquered by our enemy, the devil, who became the ruler of this fallen world. But while the ancient Jews were in exile, God promised through his prophets that he would come and rescue them. After 70 years of exile, the Persian King Cyrus released the Jews to go back and rebuild their Temple; it was the fulfillment of that promise. Just so, **God promised to send a Saviour to the human race, who would restore our friendship with God, freeing us from slavery to sin, ignorance, and hopelessness, and leading us to the heavenly Jerusalem. His name is Jesus.**

Jesus is leading us to the heavenly Jerusalem, just as King Cyrus in the first reading led the Jews back to their earthly Jerusalem and this is the source of our joy. But not all the Jews returned to their homeland, even when they could, because not all of them had believed the prophets, as today's Psalm implies (137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6). Many of them "forgot about Jerusalem" and began placing their hopes in the wealth, power, and pleasures of Babylon. After all, it seemed impossible to restore Jerusalem. It was much easier and more reasonable to accept the daily realities of life in a pagan culture, to compromise with it, to stop waiting for God to fulfill his promises, to take things into their own hands. Those who chose this path had some success and pleasure in life, but they lost their true identity; they lost their opportunity to experience the full, redeeming power of God's love. We are daily tempted to do the same thing; to become impatient with God and seek our happiness outside of the friendship with Christ, forgetting about the heavenly Jerusalem. Our loving God respects our personal freedom and will not force his love on us against our wishes. We may refuse his mercy and reject his gift. It is possible for us to abandon the love of God for the darkness of sin and separate ourselves from him forever. This is why today's Gospel says that in order to experience everlasting life we have to "believe in" Jesus. We who are exiled in a fallen world have to trust God and follow his commands, even though at times it would be easier to live like a Babylonian pagan, like everyone else around us.

This is why St Paul in the second reading (Ephesians 2:4-10 ) tells us that **we are saved by "grace," by God's free gift, but that we have to make that grace active in our lives "through faith," through the acceptance of that gift.** We do that by living as Christ would have us live: putting our time, talents, and treasure at the service of God and neighbour, no matter the cost. Today as Christ renews his unconditional love for us in the holy Mass, and especially as we receive him in Holy Communion, let's thank him for these gifts. And let's ask him for the grace not only to experience his love, but to share that experience with others, especially those who are still living in darkness. This week, may our active, Christ-like love be like a sunrise in their hearts, giving them hope and drawing them towards the saving fountain of God's grace. As Jesus renews his promise to us, **let's thank him for the growing joy his friendship gives us now, and the complete joy he promises for later, and let's ask him for the grace to follow him more and more closely as we make our way out of the exile of Lent and into the full daylight of Easter.**