

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT, B
CALLED TO LOVE

“For God so loved the world that He gave His Only Son so that whoever believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life” (Jn. 3: 16)

The Story of John: John was the third child of Anthony, a middle-class public servant, and Margaret, a carer. Theirs was a humble, dedicated family that upheld strong family values and Christian ethos. They instilled these in their three children. At school, John was a child of exceptional brilliance, he excelled in all his subjects. At his high school graduation, he was the best in the class of over seventy-five students. His parents were proud of him and promised to sacrifice all to see him through his educational career. He was loved by all, including his sister and brother. In the second year at University, John scores were noticeably low. Upon enquiry, John explained that he was having some challenges and promised to make up the following year. Some weeks into the summer holiday, at the wee hours of the morning, some police officers were at John’s house with a warrant for the arrest of John for his role in the assault and rape of a fellow student. The surprise was shocking, the disappointment was palpable and the shame was irredeemable. John was a member of a cult group at school that was causing havoc and disturbances, threatening, abusing and raping students – male and female. The father swore never to look back his way and surrendered him to the police. John was prosecuted and convicted. For years the father never visited him in prison. But after five years, he could not resist the force of a father’s love. He forgave John, visited him and when he was released, he kept his promise. He journeyed with John faithfully, helping him in all his struggles. He never let John down even though he never got “his John” back.

The Unfaithfulness of the Israelites: The story of John reminds me of the story of the children of Israel, who were God’s Chosen People and the apple of the Lord’s eyes. God bore them on eagle’s wings, parted the Red Sea, fed them with manna, gushed water from the rock, destroyed their enemies and gave them a land, flowing with milk and honey, which was not theirs to live and to possess. God made a covenant with their ancestors to be with them forever. All God asked for was obedience and faithfulness. These they promised but could not offer. The First Reading (2 Chron. 36: 14-16, 19-23) relates an account of the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, the anger of God, His punishment and His merciful forgiveness. *“All the heads of the priesthood, and the people too, added infidelity to infidelity, copying all the shameful practices of the nations and defiling the Temple that the Lord had*

consecrated for Himself in Jerusalem.” Because of this, the Lord’s anger rose against His people and He let their enemies burn down the Temple in Jerusalem, demolish the city walls, burn down all its palaces, destroyed everything of value and deported the survivors to Babylon. For seventy years they were slaves again (Jer. 29: 10). After that the Lord anointed Cyrus, a pagan king of Persia, to fulfil His covenant of love and abiding presence among His people. They were given the amnesty to return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Is. 44: 28-45: 13). God’s response to human wickedness is always opening new creative ways to engage humanity in a loving romance. He uses, even His enemies, to save His people. God’s forgiveness is always an invitation for us to respond to His love.

We are God’s Work of Art and Products of His Grace: St. Paul in the Second Reading (Eph. 2: 4-10) articulates the theology of grace in these beautiful and inspiring verses that one almost feels the warmth of God’s embrace as he reads through the lines. Pope Francis says that “God’s Name is Mercy” meaning that mercy is not an attribute of God but His nature. God cannot but be merciful to all His creatures. Psalm 130 says: *“If You, O Lord, should mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive?”* Like the Children of Israel in the First Reading, we have all *“added infidelity to infidelity”* in so many different ways. Like John in our story, we have all disappointed God, our Father. But God remains faithful even when we are unfaithful (2 Tim. 2: 13). He sustains us in His loving mercy, slow to anger abounding in love. We are indeed God’s beloved works of art, products of His grace, in a continuous process of renewal and recreation. It is not by our merit, but by His grace.

Jesus, The Fulfilment of God’s Love: Jesus is the fulfilment of the love of the Father for us all. It was to prove how much He loves us that God sent His Son to die for us while we were still sinners, St. Paul tells us (Rom. 5: 8). He is the “offspring of the woman”, who crushes the head of the offspring of the serpent so that we may be liberated from the shackles of sin and death (Gen. 3: 15). He is the fulfilment of the “bronze serpent” lifted by Moses in the desert (Num. 21: 6-9), when He is lifted on the Cross at Calvary to draw all men and women to Himself (Jn. 12: 32) and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20: 28; Mk. 10: 45). In the words of St. John in the gospel: *“God loved the world so much that He gave His Only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life”* (Jn. 3: 16). The apostle here relates to us that God’s love in Christ, was first and foremost, His divine initiative, intended not for the Jews only, but the whole of humanity. This love is freely given so that those who freely believe are saved and those who refuse

to believe condemn themselves, as the Israelites in their infidelity brought judgment upon themselves. Thus, responding to God's love is a personal choice.

The Choices We Make: St. John points out that God sent His Son as light into the world that is shrouded in the darkness of sin and iniquity, but men have demonstrated that they prefer darkness to light because their deeds are evil. This reveals the reluctance in us to disengage from our sinful ways and embrace the light of truth. St. Paul speaks of man's attachment to wickedness when he refers to the wilfulness of man to "suppress the truth" (Rom. 1: 18). Where do we stand? What choices do we make? Which do we prefer – light or darkness? We can only choose the light which is always revealing when we are determined and decided to do what is right. St. Augustine says: people "love the truth for the light it sheds, but hate it when it shows them up as being wrong."

My Dear friends, as we rejoice on this *Laetare* Sunday, having walked halfway through this journey of love with the Lord in prayer, fasting and almsgiving, let us keep it on the fore that God loved us first, and continues to love us despite ourselves. He shows His merciful love by sending His Only Begotten Son to die for us so that we may have life and have it in full (Jn. 10: 10). Let us not take God's love and forgiveness for granted – they are expressive invitations in anticipation of our loving response. Let us use this season of penance and grace to choose to mend our ways and walk in the light of God's truth in Christ. It takes a decision. It demands a choice. Let us pray that His grace may be sufficient for us.