

## Fourth Sunday of Lent

I have the habit of taking a walk first thing in the morning. If I miss my morning walk I try to walk at night. But there is quite a difference between walking in the morning and walking at night. In the morning before dawn there is always the expectation that the light will come and that the sky will gradually colour. I may begin my walk in the dark, but it is never as dark by the time I get home again. In some ways my morning walk is a symbol of what it is like to walk as a person of faith. We walk by faith in darkness, but we look forward in hope for the light that will lead us home.

The man we meet in today's gospel, was someone who was walking in darkness but very much looking for light. Nicodemus was a good man, involved in the religious life of his community. He is described as a leading Pharisee. He was attracted to Jesus but could only come to him at night when nobody would notice. In some ways he was like the people of Israel that we read about in our first reading from the Book of Chronicles. He was in exile waiting for the one who would set him free and allow him to return home. His prayer was the psalm we prayed today, the prayer of a people who hung up their harps by the rivers of Babylon.

But with his questioning heart he allows Jesus to speak to him of the depth of the love that God has for humankind, the depth of the love that God has not just for Nicodemus but for you and me. Jesus opens his heart to him and offers him a way to share eternal life.

“The Son of Man must be lifted up, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus calls himself the “Son of Man”. He wanted to remind us of the way that he became completely one with us in our humanity and took on our sinfulness so that he could free us from sin. When he speaks of being lifted up we immediately think of how Jesus was lifted up physically on a cross and on that cross offered his life for us. But Jesus was lifted up in another way too, by the Father who loved him. God lifted Jesus up into his eternal embrace in the resurrection. By giving his life on the cross Jesus was lifted up into glory to be with his Father in heaven. Jesus tells us that he must be lifted up for our sake, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

In the days ahead, we will be given the opportunity to look hard at the figure of Jesus hanging on the cross. What will we be looking for? It may be hard for us to see beyond the pain and suffering that Jesus endured. But maybe we will be able to see beyond those external things and begin to see why Jesus was there. Maybe

we will be graced to see something of the heart of Jesus, something of the immeasurable love that moved him to give his life for us. Jesus in his dying showed us how to live. His faithfulness to what his Father called him to be, allowed him to pass through an unjust and sinful death into the arms of a loving Father.

Jesus showed us that love cannot be crushed by hatred and evil. Jesus showed us that life is eternal, and death is only for a moment. The Spirit of love that Jesus gives to us from the cross makes it possible for us to give meaning to our suffering. God's Spirit of love transforms our crosses into a resurrection like his. God is all-powerful, all powerful love, and from the broken heart of God enough love pours out over this world to transform it into a place where God can be at home, and we can be at home with God. It is up to us to receive that love.

That is why Jesus can go on and say in today's gospel, "Yes, 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." We need to remember again that we do not believe with our mind or our intellect. We believe with our hearts and our wills. Believing in someone is an expression of our relationship with that person. To believe means to be in love. To believe in Jesus means to be in love with Jesus. It means that we are ready to listen to Jesus and to trust that in his love for us he will care for us. It means to live in communion with Jesus as best we know how and so to allow Jesus to reach out to others in love.

As with every other loving relationship, loving Jesus can feel like hard work. There are times when we may not feel close to Jesus. There are times when for all our loving, we do not have a sense that Jesus is loving us. Maybe that is when we need to remind ourselves that living by faith is not about feelings, but about choices. We do not measure our faith by how close God feels to us, but by how close we are to choosing his will.

And we need to put our choosing into perspective. St Paul makes it clear today that God chooses us and that we do not choose God. Faith and salvation are God's gifts to us. "Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it."

But as Jesus reminds us today we are all free to reject that gift. We are all free to reject God's love for us. We can choose to walk in the darkness of the night, or we choose to walk in the morning in the expectation and hope that the light of God's love will guide us home.