

Fourth Sunday of Lent – C Cycle March 6, 2016

We just heard the story of a young boy whose life was misdirected by love of riches and pleasure. After his so called friends abandoned him and he suffered hunger and want for a period of time, he came to his senses and returned to his father. He returned a changed person. Fortunately, he had a loving and forgiving father who accepted him unconditionally. The point of the story is abundantly clear when we consider the relationship between the father and his younger son. As regards the relationship between the father and the older son, Jesus leaves the conclusion open-ended. We have to reflect on what might have happened, whether the older son gave in to his father's pleading to be forgiving or whether he refused. How we end the story will tell us a lot about ourselves.

I want to tell you about another young man whose story is somewhat similar. He was Catholic to start with but admits that he was not a very good one. His father was a government official and this young man enjoyed the comforts of those who were well off. He described himself at sixteen as a scatterbrained youth who had "turned away from God and did not keep his commandments." As his story goes, he was kidnapped and sold as a slave and made to labor on a farm for six years. Like the prodigal son who was without friends and who suffered without adequate food or shelter, this young man came to his senses and he learned obedience through what he suffered. He discovered (and we quote) "God showed me how to have faith in him forever, as one who is never to be doubted." After six years God spoke to him in a way that he heard with his own ears. He would escape and God audibly told him when to leave and what direction to go in order to accomplish his escape. Miraculously God protected him along the way until he arrived back home. Like the prodigal son, he came home a new person. Although his parents wanted to keep him at home with them, his love for God led him to want to serve God as a priest. Even more than serving as a priest, his love for others led him to want to return to the people who captured and enslaved him and teach them about God. And that he did. After overcoming many obstacles, including rejection by the hierarchy, a breach of confidence by a friend to whom he entrusted a confession of his past life, his lack of education and social graces, he returned as a bishop to the people who had enslaved him. Once he arrived he wasn't greeted with open arms. Again, in his own words, he said "daily I expect either murder, or robbery, or enslavement." He writes elsewhere "they seized me with my companions. And on that day they most eagerly desired to kill me; but my time had not yet come. And everything they found with us they plundered, and myself they bound in chains." He feared nothing, for even if he were to be put to death, he felt that would have been the supreme act of love for his God. But God had other intentions than that he should be a martyr. For 30 years he served God and the people who once enslaved him and his work was blessed. He ordained many bishops and priests, established convents, monasteries and schools and in thirty years saw the conversion of almost all of Ireland. And of course you all know I've been talking about St. Patrick, who is one of our patronal saints and whose statue is under the choir loft. His work was so successful that in a short time Ireland was sending out missionaries to revitalize the faith of Europe which had fallen into decline. Irish missionaries have been a blessing to the Church ever since.

For those who are Irish and who honor Patrick, the best way to truly honor him is not by drinking a Guinness. We should respond to his example and his call to holiness. Again quoting Patrick, he asks those who believe in him and love him to "strengthen and confirm your faith...That will be my glory, for a wise son is the glory of his father."

And for those who are not Irish and who think too much is made of St. Patrick on March 17th, I would like you to think of how our faith has been strengthened by the witness of many Irish saints and how our civilization has been preserved by the scholarship of the Irish during the days when mainland Europe was being overrun by barbarians. The great heritage of western civilization, from the Greek and Roman classics to Jewish and Christian works, would have been utterly lost were it not for the holy men and women of unconquered Ireland. These Irish recorded the great works of western civilization in their monasteries and convents (remember all books had to be written by hand). They brought this learning back to Europe after it began to stabilize in the eighth century under Charlemagne. Whether you're Irish or not, we all owe a great debt to the Irish and we pray that our patron, St. Patrick, blesses our parish and our families.

Fifth Sunday of Lent – C Cycle **March 13, 2016**

INTRODUCTION – *Isaiah 43, 6-21; Philippians 3, 8-14; John 8, 1-11* God's people were a captive people, enslaved by the Babylonians 600 years before Christ. After 50 years of captivity, God sent them a prophet to announce to them that they were about to be set free. We hear that prophet in today's first reading. God tells them their release from the Babylonians would be no less spectacular than their release from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. Even as the prophet speaks, he tells them the road back to their own land is being made ready. God's statement, "see, I am doing something new," leads us into the gospel. There we hear about a woman caught in adultery who was about to be sentenced to death. Jesus is doing something new: offering forgiveness for sins rather than condemnation and death.

HOMILY – One afternoon the parish priest was getting ready to hear confessions. As he entered the confessional room, which had a divider in it, he found a man already in the room waiting for him. The man told the parish priest, "It's been 45 years since I've been to confession. I am impressed how things have changed. The room is well lit, it's a nice easy chair to sit in, a bottle of scotch, some nice cigars. It wasn't that way the last time I went." The parish priest said, "yes, it is rather comfortable, but where you are sitting is my side of the confessional room." By the way, if anyone wants to check out our confessional, they are welcome to. It's pretty simple.

I thought I might say something about confession today. The sacrament referred to as "confession" is also called the sacrament of penance or reconciliation. I thought the topic might be appropriate because of today's gospel where Jesus, as he had done many times in the gospels, demonstrates God's merciful love.

He did not come to condemn but to save. In the old days, which many of us remember, the priest often thought his job was to scold the penitent. Many people never came back because of that. I always tell our people in the RCIA, if a priest starts to bawl you out, get up and leave. Go to someone else who sees their role as that of Christ who offers freedom from guilt and shame and a sense of God's peace. Fortunately, I was blest with that kind of a confessor almost all my life. I've always felt that scolding doesn't help them to grow spiritually, but offering a person the chance to start over and the opportunity to know God's love does help a person to grow. Imagine how this woman in the gospel was changed by her encounter with Christ.

Jesus came not to condemn but to save. That's the purpose of confession or reconciliation. Sometimes the priest tries to guide a person to see how wrong their behavior might be, but that

guidance should be done in a gentle and loving way. The only time I know that Jesus was ever harsh with anyone was with the religious leaders who thought they were perfect and refused to see their faults. We're all sinners. We are all in need of God's mercy and love. That's why Christ came to us. You'll notice when the chips were down and Jesus started writing on the ground, no one threw any stones. They knew he had called their bluff. Some people have speculated that Jesus was writing people's sins, but no one knows for sure. Anyway, we're all in the same boat with the crowd in the gospel, we would all have to walk away if Jesus said, "let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone at her." Jesus does not whitewash sin or ignore the seriousness of it. More than anyone he knows how it hurts us and hurts our relationship with God. Notice he told the woman, "go and from now on, do not sin any more." The old catechism called this "a firm purpose of amendment."

In the first five or six centuries of the Church, people were allowed to receive confession only once in their lifetime. It was only for publicly committed serious sins. The attitude of Church leaders was that if a person sinned again, there was no hope for them. In addition, people had to go through a period of public penance *before* reconciliation. Around the sixth or seventh century, mostly due to the influence of the monasteries, a practice developed where the sacrament began to be used as spiritual direction. People went, even though they had no grave sins, and they went more frequently. It is the practice we have today, although many more people took advantage of the sacrament two or three generations ago than they do now. I think a person should go as often as they find it helpful, at least once or twice a year just to help themselves grow spiritually.

The sacrament of reconciliation is one of the most rewarding parts of being a priest, especially when I know I have helped lift a burden of guilt and self-hatred off a person's conscience. I am blest to be able to participate in the process of bringing God's love and peace to someone. I might mention that we have our penance service this Wednesday. There is an insert in today's bulletin describing how to make a good confession. Amen.

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord – C Cycle

March 20, 2016

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 50, 4-7; Phil 2, 6-11; Luke 22, 14 to 23, 56) In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah there are four unique passages called the Servant Songs. These passages were composed about 500 years before Christ. The Servant is not identified by name. The Servant was called by God to bring justice to the earth and light to the nations, a call that would result in sacrifice and suffering. Even though they go back 500 years before Christ, they marvelously describe Jesus. Today's first reading is part of the third Servant Song.

HOMILY: As we begin Holy Week, we have to remember that only you and I can make this week holy. If we treat this week as any ordinary week, without making some room in our schedules for reflection and prayer, it will be holy in name only. Here at St. Boniface, we will try to make this week holy by offering prayerful liturgies. Most of us probably know that Pope Francis is stressing the theme of mercy; our Mass today reminds us of how merciful God is in that he sent his Son to us, not to condemn us, but to save us. His sufferings show how greatly he loves us and how desperately he wants to lead us to holiness and to our heavenly home. Jesus could never quit or run away from the mission he had been given. It was in God's plans that he would give everything he had to the work the Father gave him to do – even eventually to give his own life.

I could spend an hour talking about our readings today, and I would still have much more that could be said, but there wouldn't be time to say it. However, the Church wisely recommends a brief homily for today. Instead of my adding anything to what we've already heard, we can allow God's Word to echo in our mind and hearts. Besides that, in the seminary I learned that the mind cannot absorb any more than the seat can endure. What we have heard in our scriptures we now re-enact in a mysterious way in the sacrifice of the Mass. Amen.

A possibly good homily is the liturgy of the Hours reading for the Friday of the first week of Lent – a wonderful homily by St. Aelred.

**Good Friday
March 25, 2016**

God's love is revealed to us in many ways and one of the most powerful ways is through Jesus giving his life for us. It was an act of love because he would never give up the mission the Father sent him on; i.e., to keep helping all people to pursue the way to eternal life. Today, however, as I reflected on the passion, I was struck by some of the little caring things he did for others while the Roman and Jewish world were plotting horrible things to do to him.

The service last evening is my first example. Jesus washed everyone's feet. Feet got pretty filthy in that society – roads were dusty and dirty and remember animals traveled over the same roads as the people. It was refreshing to have clean feet.

Another example of the kindness of Jesus we see in St. Luke's gospel. Jesus gave the Eucharist to everyone who had gathered at the Last Supper, even Judas who had already arranged to betray him. It was after the institution of the Eucharist in Luke that Jesus announced that one of his disciples was going to betray him. Judas was still there at the time (remember how Judas asked Jesus "is it I Rabbi?" and Jesus said, "you have said so.")

When a disciple cut off the ear of one of the temple police who came to arrest Jesus in the garden, Jesus healed his ear; then he told the disciples to put away their swords. He was not going to use violence against those who came to create a violent end for him.

After Peter had denied Jesus (which Jesus had predicted earlier in the evening), the gospel tells us Jesus looked at Peter, perhaps as if to say "didn't I tell you that would happen." I can't imagine Jesus' look was anything other than a look of love and forgiveness. If it were a look of hatred or anger, I think Peter might have gone out and destroyed himself like Judas did. Instead Peter went out and wept bitterly.

As Jesus was making his way to Calvary, the women of Jerusalem were crying and he said, "don't weep for me, weep for yourselves and your children" because he could foresee terrible things were going to happen. In spite of his suffering, he wanted them to be aware of the dangers they would soon face.

He forgave his executioners: "Father forgive them." He even made excuses for them for "they know not what they are doing."

And he forgave the thief who was crucified with him: "today, you will be with me in paradise."

These little acts of kindness don't compare to the one great act of love Jesus showed us when he gave his life for us. These little acts of kindness that we hear about in the Scriptures demonstrate for us one really important lesson about life and suffering. Even when life's sufferings are crushing us, Jesus showed us we can still thoughtfully reach out to others who are troubled or suffering. Amen.

From past years: Every day we gather around this altar to celebrate the Eucharist. In the Eucharist God's love is shown to us through Jesus Christ who gave his life for us on the cross. So he can share his life with us now, he continues to give us his body and blood. The gift of his life involved immense suffering on his part. Our gospels do not dwell long on his sufferings. They didn't need to because the people who lived at the time the gospels were written knew what crucifixion involved. It was one of the most agonizing forms of execution that human beings had ever concocted. On this one day of the year, out of respect for what Jesus went through, we do not celebrate the Eucharist as we do every other day. Instead we have a rather extended service of reflection, intercessions, and Communion.

Rather than focusing on the physical sufferings of Jesus, I would like to reflect on the mystery of suffering itself. The book of Genesis attributes suffering to sin. The first man and woman God created lost the happiness God had intended for them because of their disobedience to God. The whole first part of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel and Kings and many of the prophets reflects this notion of suffering – that it is caused by disobedience to God. There is some truth in that notion, but it is not the whole story as the Book of Job tells us. Without telling us why good people suffer, the Book of Job took issue with the old theology on suffering. Sometime about 500 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah gave us a new way of thinking about suffering - that it can have a positive purpose – that one person's suffering can bring blessings to another. We heard it clearly expressed in today's first reading from a passage in Isaiah known as the 4th Servant Song. I would like to repeat some phrases from our first reading; they are so powerful. God's Servant, Isaiah says, "was spurned and avoided by people, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity...Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured...he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed...though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood, the Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity... he shall take away the sins of many and win pardon for their offenses."

It is easy to see in a family how one person's sufferings can benefit another person. For example, how parents make sacrifices for their children, how they have to go through difficult times to support those they love and teach them and discipline them. The sufferings of Jesus, however, were a scandal to his followers. The Messiah was not expected to suffer. We remember when Jesus tried to warn his disciples that he would "suffer greatly and be killed and would rise again." Peter replied, "Heaven forbid, Lord, this will never happen to you." Jesus response to Peter is familiar to all of us: "Get behind me, Satan."

Why did he have to suffer? I have asked myself that question many times and others have asked me that question many times as well. My current thinking on this is I think he had to suffer because of who he was. He was God's Son who came among a sinful people. He could not be anything other than who he was and, without redemption, we could not be anything other than who we are. He was like a lamb dropped into a tigers' cage. He was from above, we are from this world, his holiness did not fit in with our sinful ways. The only kingdom we could know was the kingdom of this world and his kingdom did not belong to this world. Thus he came to

his own and his own received him not. Because he could not be other than who he was and because he was faithful to the purpose for which he came - his purpose being to confront the powers of evil, to heal and to teach us to change our lives and to live in a new way - conflict, confrontation, rejection and suffering were inevitable. Yet his sufferings led to his resurrection and glorification. Jesus has "passed through the heavens," as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, to take his rightful place at God's right hand. But he has not left us, rather through his Spirit, through prayer and the sacraments and through his love in us he has transformed us and made us sharers in his new life. He has made us into a new creation. "He has become the source of eternal life for all who obey him," the Letter to the Hebrews tells us. Or as Isaiah tells us: "By his stripes we were healed." Amen.

Easter

March 27, 2016

One of the nice things about getting older is that you can hide your own Easter eggs and have fun finding them. (*The Joyful Noiseletter, May-June, 2014 pg.1*)

During Holy Week the nursery school teacher was discussing Jesus' death and resurrection with her little students. When the teacher asked why Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter Sunday, a 4 year old girl raised her hand and answered, "He probably wanted to see what the Easter bunny brought for him."

(*The Joyful Noiseletter, May-June,2012, pg 2*)

We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world, and so we do not let our sorrows take away our hope.

No one witnessed the resurrection – as far as we know. Matthew's gospel tells us about the guards at the tomb, but if they witnessed the resurrection, they only told the chief priests and elders about it. Their story actually contradicted itself because, if they fell asleep, how could they say the disciples came to steal Jesus' body. They would have been sleeping with their eyes open to be able to know what happened while they were asleep.

Our knowledge of the resurrection comes from the gospels. The first hint of the resurrection is the empty tomb. It does not prove the resurrection, but it is evidence that his body was not where it had been buried. The apostles, Peter and John, found the burial clothes, not messed up but neatly folded, leaving the impression that it was not a robbery. To affirm that Jesus had risen, an angel appeared who announced to those looking for Jesus that he had risen. But evidence of the resurrection becomes more clear when Jesus shows up himself and offers to let his apostles touch his wounds and see that he is real. It wasn't just to one or two people that he appeared. Not counting the women to whom he appeared first of all and to the two disciples going to Emmaus, Paul gives us a long list of people who saw Jesus: Peter, the Twelve, more than 500 brothers and sisters, then James and then to all the apostles, then to Paul himself. Paul's early martyrdom does not mention those to whom Jesus appeared after Paul died, such as the author of the Book of Revelations. It wasn't just the appearances that supports our faith in the resurrection, it is the fact that most of those who saw Jesus and believed in him were put to death for their faith. They had nothing to gain in a worldly way from their faith in Jesus except persecution and martyrdom. One more argument for the resurrection, mentioned in today's gospel, is that the women remembered Jesus had predicted his resurrection while he was in Galilee. Perhaps, at the time Jesus told them he would suffer and die and rise again, it made no great impact on them, but after they remembered it, it helped to make a great difference in their

faith. That is why I have been telling you all these reasons for believing in the resurrection, reasons that strengthen my own faith, and so that you will remember. You will remember when you are experiencing one of life's Good Friday's that Easter Sunday is right around the corner. You will remember that Jesus rose not just for his own glory but so that we could all share in his eternal life. As Paul told us in the second reading, "When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory. (*Colossians 3,4*). Amen.

A pastor was telling some of the little children in school about Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. As he was teaching them about some of Jesus' last words on the cross, he asked: "What was the last thing Jesus said before he died?" One little child raised his hand and answered, "Jesus said: 'I'll be back.'"

Jesus didn't quite phrase it that way, but he did say "in a little while you will not see me, and then a little while later you will see me." He also said, "it is because I am going to the Father." (Jn 16,16) Even though by now Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection three times, the Apostles had no idea what Jesus was talking about - it took the full experience of seeing Jesus arrested, condemned, crucified, and buried, and then to find the tomb empty three days later, as well as having him personally appear to them, eat with them and show them his wounds. St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians and the various gospels tell us of a number of appearances that took place before the apostles fully started to believe.

But once they did, and once the Holy Spirit came down on them, they were a force that could not be stopped in spreading the "good news" that Jesus had risen.

They had seen Jesus raise dead people back to life, namely, the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Naim and Jesus' friend Lazarus who lived in Bethany. But those were temporary resurrections; those people would die again. Jesus' resurrection was totally different; he could not die again, his human body was filled with divine life, which is eternal life. His body took on the properties of a spirit, yet it was not a spirit, it was real flesh and blood.

Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of something totally new and different. It is a mystery that opens up to us eternal life. He came not just to die and rise for his own benefit, but for us, that we too might live with him forever. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life and may have it to the full." (Jn 10,10)

Today's feast is the most important feast in the whole year. If Jesus had not risen, we would never have heard of him. The apostles would never have preached about him nor would they have given their lives for what they preached. Through the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' kingdom began to grow and it continues to grow in spite of 2000 years when there was always someone who was trying to destroy it. Tonight we gather in his memory, tonight we hear again the story of his victory over death, tonight we receive the sacraments that keep us united with him and growing in his life and his love.

Tonight we give praise for all that God has done for us in Jesus and tonight I wish all of you a blessed Easter. I pray that the light of the Easter fire might burn in your hearts throughout the rest of the year. Amen.