

Lent 4 - B - 1

2 Chr 36:14-16,19-23; Eph 2:4-10; JN 3:14-21

I recently watched the old movie “Casablanca.” Someone was talking about it, and I didn’t know if I had ever actually seen it, so I watched it. There was a weird thing that stood out to me: the smoking. It seemed that every time a character struck up a conversation with another character, or people sat down to have a drink (which they did every 4 or 5 minutes) a cigarette was lit. Smoking all over the place. You probably know that at that time, the health effects of smoking were not fully known, people weren’t aware of how much they were hurting their health, or how addicted they were to the nicotine. They were slaves to something that was killing them, and they were not really that aware of how they were being harmed. If someone came up and said: “smokin’s bad for ya, see. That stuff’ll kill ya!” They would have been laughed out of the room. Today’s readings call focus to warnings that God has given to humanity through the ages - ones that we often don’t take seriously. We are called to have faith. Faith in the word of God and of our need for being saved, and also faith in the one who has come to save us.

We heard today one of the most famous lines in the Gospel: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.* The famous John 3:16. It is a summary of the Gospel, the “Good News” - we are all in danger of perishing, in fact, are all on our way to it, but God intervenes and sends his only Son to save us. To understand this requires the two pieces of faith I mentioned. First, the faith to believe God about our situation and our need to be saved. Like smokers of the 1920’s we are ignorant of the danger we are in. God has been trying to tell us through the prophets, and through human experience, that we can be held in slavery to things in this world and then wind up in a foreign place, separated from God in the next life. We too often will excuse ourselves and others and assure ourselves of a place in heaven based upon our own personal judgement. A thing I hear all the time is to declare that if someone is a “good person” then we can sure that they are in heaven after death. In other words, life’s goal is to be a “good person” (as we define a good person, by the way). But we are not the judge. We excuse ourselves of following the things God has said to do and then believe that if we don’t think it is a problem, then it is ok. Perhaps the lower Mass attendance, less involvement in the discipleship activity of Jesus by churches, and less devotion to God are the result of this thinking. “He’s a ‘good person’ so what if he doesn’t do all that religion and Jesus stuff” - but God tells us to do that Religion and Jesus stuff. Is our faith in our own personal beliefs - or those of the world - greater than faith in God?

The story of the Israelite people in their wanderings is a constant saga of drifting away from what God demanded, and then falling into ruin, death, and slavery. They always are pretty proud of themselves, pretty sure that nothing bad will happen if they fail to follow God's laws, and then they wind up in a situation like we heard today: *Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon*. If they lived at all, they became slaves. But in that same reading we hear of God's efforts through the prophets to guide them - and not to make them God's slaves - but to teach them a way of life that leads in the end to greater freedom. We heard: *Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people*. It is out of compassion that God directs us in ways that lead to freedom from the slaveries of this world, and saved us from everlasting death. We should listen to these messages more closely than the smokers in Casablanca would have taken a Surgeon General's warning. What are the messages God is sending to us personally?

But there is Good News. We heard in the second reading: *God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ*. It is through faith in Jesus that we are finally saved. And if we have faith in the words of Jesus, we would work to follow the teaching of the Lord. Listen to Jesus - he is not saying just believe that everything will be alright and then do as you please. He says *Come follow me*, he tells us to imitate him praising the Father and caring for others, he says that unless we are joined to him we have no life in us, he points to the scriptures which present a moral law to follow in our lives, then he himself expands this law in his teaching. However, it is not by doing these things that we gain heaven, the Catholic Church does not teach this, although some may tell you so. The truth is in the second reading: *For by grace [that is God's free gift] you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God*. The danger is that we could reject this free gift of salvation by believing that we that we can set the rules of life - this causes us to have greater faith in ourselves than faith in God. Action demonstrates our faith.

Each of us can take a few minutes to think of how we have been seduced by the ways of the world like the smokers in Casablanca were seduced by the glamor of smoking. We can look where we have put a greater emphasis on our own comfort and on using our time as we see fit rather than in doing what God has called us to do. Remember the words of Jesus today: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*. Looking at all this is not to make us feel bad, or to make us turn away from Jesus because his way is inconvenient or seems too hard - it is to look at Jesus in faith, act in faith, and to share this faith with others, to encourage others to come to salvation in Jesus Christ.