

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B, 2009

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We are blessed today to have, for our Gospel reading, the most widely-known verse in all of Holy Scripture - John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That having been said, to understand the power of this verse, we cannot disassociate it from its context and, unfortunately, that is exactly what the compilers of our lectionary have done with today's lesson; they've lifted it from its context. This message of God's great and unconditional love comes to us in the context of a discussion with a man named Nicodemus, a man who was a devout Jew. He came to Jesus and asked what he must do to be saved. Now John, the author of today's gospel passage doesn't tell us, in so many words, that Nicodemus asked precisely this question, but it is the only question he could have asked to get the response that he did, and to grasp this, you have to read the whole passage, beginning with verse one.

In brief, Jesus told Nicodemus that salvation is a gift from God, not something to be earned, and that it comes to those who believe that Jesus is the Lord. In the process of this conversation, our Lord looked forward to his crucifixion and compared his coming offering with Israel's deliverance from Egypt. In a reference to our Old Testament reading from Numbers, Jesus said that as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent, that God commanded him to make, so that those who looked upon it would live, so by lifting Jesus up in crucifixion, those who looked at him in faith and believed in him would live eternally. God, Jesus said, did not send him into this world to condemn it, but to provide a means by which all that believe can live eternally with our Father God. This is the point that Saint Paul was making in the Epistle reading we have today. We are saved by God's action, not by our own actions or merit, but by God's grace through faith in the saving work of our Lord – his death for us on the Cross. And this is very good news. We cannot do this on our own, but God, in his infinite mercy does this for us for the simple reason that he loves us, in spite of our brokenness, in spite of our disobedience, in spite of our human propensity to sin.

Are any left out, Jesus asked rhetorically, and he answered this way: those who live in the dark are those who do not believe, those who do not have faith, and they will live in the dark forever.

We read this passage during Lent. Lent is a time for introspection, for seeing ourselves from God's perspective, seeing ourselves without protective illusion, seeing ourselves in the dark. When we do this, we can open ourselves to the healing power of God's love and let the grace of God work in us to bring us to the light – the light of Christ. This is the basis of our hope, that even though we are far from perfect, in love and obedience to the expectations that God has for us, even though we are undeserving of God's love, God does not measure out his love on a tit for tat basis, and the light of Christ shines to illumine those base things so that we may know them

and offer them to Christ to be washed in his precious blood. And, in offering ourselves to him who is lifted high on the Cross for us, we may once again know the reassurance that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn us, but to redeem us and give us eternal life. And we shall know that this is God's gift of grace, through faith in Jesus the Lord. *Amen.*