

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23
<i>Response</i>	Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 2:4-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 3:14-21

The Fourth Sunday of Lent marks the halfway point through the six weeks of the Lenten season and on this Sunday we turn to one of the most enigmatic and mysterious of Jesus' sayings in all the Gospels. It's his famous saying about the bronze serpent in the Gospel of John 3. And this is another one of those occasions where, as I mentioned before, during the Lenten and Easter seasons the Church will depart from the Gospel of Mark and give us a passage from the Gospel of John instead. So let's look at this passage together and we'll see that it's a kind of curious combination of Jesus's most famous statement: John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son"; and one of Jesus's most cryptic statements about the Son of Man being lifted up as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness. So let's look through that together and we'll try to unpack it's meaning. In John 3:14-21 Jesus says this:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds

were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.¹

Alright, as is usually the case with John there is a lot going on here. This is a dense passage, there really is lots of rich meaning in it. For our purposes here I'd like to focus most of our energies, first and foremost, just on the image that sticks in most people's mind, which is the strange analogy that Jesus draws between the lifting up of the serpent by Moses in the Old Testament and the lifting up of the Son of Man in the New Testament. In order to understand what Jesus is talking about you have to go back to the Old Testament, to the book of Numbers 21, where the story of Moses and the bronze serpent is given. So even though this isn't an Old Testament reading for this Sunday, I'm still going to take you back there and we want to look at it carefully so we can understand what Jesus is saying in its context. So if you go back to Numbers 21:4-9, we have the story of the bronze serpent in the Old Testament and this is what it says, this takes place during the time of the Exodus from Egypt. So they're in the desert, they're wandering in the wilderness, and during that period it says this:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."

Alright, pause there for second. When they say we loathe this worthless food, they're talking about the manna from heaven. They are saying 'we hate this manna.' They are sick of it, right. It continues:

Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Alright, end of story. Okay, so back to the gospel then. That's the background to what Jesus is talking about in the gospel. So when he talks about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, he's assuming that his Jewish audience is going to know this story of the wilderness generation. And how they complained against God and against Moses and how they complained in particular about the manna that had come down from heaven to feed them. And how in response to their complaints and their lack of faith, God sent fiery serpents among them that began to bite them and kill them. And that Moses made a bronze serpent to lift up in front of them, so that whoever would look upon the serpent would be saved, kind of through a miraculous act of healing.

Now the first point we want to make here is this. In order to understand Jesus using this story, we kind of have to understand the story in its original context. So what in the world is going on in this story of a bronze serpent that somehow miraculously saves the Israelites from these fiery serpents that are biting them and killing them in the desert? Well if you put that story in its original context in the Old Testament, it should make you think of an earlier story, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Think about it for a second. When's the last time someone rejected heavenly food, right, that was given to them by God and a serpent came and brought death to them. Well it's in the Garden of Eden. So Adam and Eve reject the fruit of the tree of life, take of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, break God's command and the serpent comes in the garden and causes them to fall, and brings death into the world. Well in a sense, what's happening in Numbers 21 is that Israel is recapitulating the fall of Adam and Eve, but they're doing it now in the desert, in the wilderness during the time of the Exodus. So just as Adam and Eve rejected the command of God and brought death upon themselves, so now the Israelites in the desert reject the gift of God in the manna from heaven and bring death upon them-

selves. And then in response to that, Moses does something strange. God commands him to make a serpent out of bronze and to lift it up on a pole.

Now in order to understand this you have to notice something, the Hebrew here. So go back to the Hebrew text. Although your English Bible might say poisonous serpents or fiery serpents, the actual Hebrew word there is that God sent *seraphim* among the people. The word in Hebrew, *seraphim*, means the burning ones, okay, and it's a word that's used to describe angels as well. So the Seraphim and the Cherubim are different kinds of angels. So the Seraphim are some of the highest angels and, in a sense, they're kind of composed of spiritual fire, they are the burning ones. So any first century Jew reading this account in the book of Numbers would've seen the serpent, these fiery serpents, as kind of symbolic of the demonic, of demonic forces, who have come to bring death upon the Israelites. And so when Moses makes an image of a fiery serpent, of a bronze serpent, and lifted it up on a pole, in a sense he's using the very instrument that brought death to the Israelites in order to save them from this diabolical attack that they have fallen under. So with that in mind then, think about what Jesus is doing here. In this case, he's making a typological connection with the Old Testament, but it's unique. Because most typologies of the Old Testament will take some figure like Adam, or David, or Moses, and Jesus will draw out the parallels between him and that positive Old Testament figure, even if they are sinful, they still have positive elements, like David as a King, Moses as a prophet, Adam as the first man, what not. In this case Jesus takes it very strange. He takes an image for the demonic, an image for something that's deadly, the image of the serpent, and he says just as that bronze serpent was lifted up in the desert, so too the Son of Man is going to be lifted up so that whoever believes in him might have eternal life.

Alright, what in the world does that mean? You have to imagine that in his original context, when Jesus is saying these words. He's speaking to Nicodemus. And Nicodemus must've walked away scratching his head, like I've no idea what this guy said to me, and I have no idea how to make sense of it. But the answer to it is actually really simple when you understand the cross, that Jesus is pointing forward to the cross. Because on the cross, what is Jesus going to do? He is, in a sense, going to take the sin of humanity upon himself. He's going to take the prin-

cial weapon of the devil, death itself, upon himself in order to put death itself to death. He's going to, in a sense, as St. Paul will say in 2 Corinthians 5:

...he who knew no sin became sin for our sake so that we might become the righteousness of God.

In other words, he's going to become the sin bearer so that through his taking our sin upon himself we might have life, we might be set free, we might be saved from the power of the very serpent, the devil, who brought sin and death upon humanity in the garden, and who also led the Israelites in the wilderness to abandon God and to suffer the punishment of death at the hands of the fiery serpents in the wilderness. That's what's going on here. It's kind of a subtle and complex typology, but once you see it clearly it begins to make sense here. It's a very mysterious way of looking at the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

And in that context, Jesus goes on to explain the meaning of the cross. Because what he says here in the next verse is for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. And there's the link with the bronze serpent, right. What were the serpents doing in the Old Testament? They were causing the Israelites to perish, and in that sense, they're a kind of prefiguration of diabolical attacks in the New Testament. That Satan and his angels are still seeking our death. They still are seeking to get us to sin so that we might perish. And so as a solution to that problem, as savior of the world, God sends his Son into the world so that whoever believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life. Because as John goes on to say, God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn it, but precisely to save it because he loves us, right. He goes on to elaborate on what that means with this fascinating image of light and dark.

So this is again another clue to you that Jesus is talking about the battle between God and Satan, between the light and the dark, between goodness and evil. When he says that the real judgment of the world is not what the Son does but that the light has come into the world, and that human beings love the darkness more than they love the light, in John's Gospel the darkness is always an image for Satan. The darkness is always an image for the diabolical, the darkness is always an image for

sin. So for example, a few chapters down the road, when Judas betrays Jesus, John's going to tell us it was night when he goes out to betray Jesus, and that he's under the influence of the devil when he betrays Jesus. So this whole passage we're reading here about the serpent in the wilderness and Christ on the cross, about light and darkness and the battle between those two, it's all really cast in the terms of Satan and the devil trying to seek our eternal damnation. And God, because he loves us, sending his Son into the world, not just to be the Messiah, not just to be the king of Israel, but to be the one who delivers us from the power of Satan, the one who delivers us from the power of the devil, to be the one who saves us from the deadly poison of the serpent who first led our parents to sin in the Garden of Eden. So that's really what the image is all about here. And you might ask well hold on, what does that have to do with Lent, right? Why are we listening to this on the Fourth Sunday of Lent? And the answer's really simple, but it's important. It's because the lifting up of Jesus on the cross is a kind of symbol of both his death and his resurrection. So he's going to be lifted up on the cross in order to die for the sins of the world, but he's also going to be lifted up in the resurrection, so that he might draw all men to himself, as he'll say a little bit later in the gospel. So it's a powerful image of the exaltation of Christ, by which he triumphs over the devil and over death itself.

Okay, so that's kind of the essence of the Gospel reading for this week. And I think it is interesting that this famous verse of John 3:16, which seems so simple, is actually given to us in a very mysterious context, where Jesus is making all these allusions to the Old Testament, which brings us back to the first reading. So if we look this week at the first reading for the Fourth Sunday of Lent in Year B, we find that it is from everyone's favorite book, 2 Chronicles. So if we turn to 2 Chronicles in the Old Testament, obviously I'm being sarcastic, Chronicles is one of the least frequently read books of the Old Testament, at least by Christian writers. But it was actually very important to ancient Jewish writers and I think that's one of the reasons it's given to us for today, because this chapter from the book of Chronicles, 36, is in ancient Jewish tradition. This is the last chapter of the Bible, alright. So you might be thinking, well wait, what do you mean, I thought the last book of the Bible was Malachi? Well that's in the Christian Bible. So the Christian Bible is set up differently than the ancient Jewish Bible. The Christian Bible ends with the books of the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and then the 12 minor Prophets,

the last of which is Malachi, all of which are pointing forward to the coming of the Messiah. But if you look at a contemporary Jewish Bible, as well as ancient Jewish Bibles in Hebrew, the last book of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture was 2 Chronicles, which describes the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah in the Fifth Century B.C. and then these mysterious words about going up to the temple. So let's read through the Old Testament reading and I'll try to tell you why I think the Church selected that for today. Alright, 2 Chronicles 36:14-16 says this:

All the leading priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, till there was no remedy.

The lectionary now skips down to verse 19, it says this:

And they [meaning the Babylonians] burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He [meaning the King of Babylon] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, `The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.'"

Alright, so what do we make of that? Well as already pointed out, these are the final words of the Hebrew Bible, the final words of the Jewish Canon of Scripture. And they end with the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple, but then also the restoration of the city of Jerusalem under the edict of King Cyrus of Persia. So let me make sure you've got a sense here of the timeframe. So in the Sixth Century B.C., around 587 B.C., the Babylonians came in and because of the sins of the people, God allows the temple and Jerusalem to be completely destroyed. Despite the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah who had told them over and over again repent, repent, repent, the people didn't listen and as a result the Babylonians come in, they destroy it, and they take them into exile. But what happens in the book of Chronicles is that God raises up the pagan king of Persia, Cyrus, to kind of act as a deliverer figure for the people of Israel. And Cyrus makes a decree in the Sixth Century B.C. that not only can the Judeans, the Jews, go home but that they can rebuild the temple of God. And so the last word of the Hebrew Bible is the pagan king telling the Israelite people, telling the Jews, to go up to Jerusalem in order to rebuild it and restore it. So in other words, the Jewish Bible would've ended on this note of hope, that one day, one day the temple would be restored, that it would be rebuilt. That the prophecies of a new glorious temple would be brought to pass and that the people would once again be able to go up to Jerusalem in order to worship the Lord, in order to worship their God. So it ends on a note of hope.

So I think that the reason that the Church picks this for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, for the lectionary, is because it kind of brings the story of salvation history from Abraham through the Exodus, like we saw last week, up to the time of the Babylonian exile and the return from exile under King Cyrus of Persia, which points us forward to the messianic age, right, to Christ who's going to come as a Messiah and build a new temple. And not just a new temple, but he's going to usher in a new creation and the so-called new Jerusalem. This new city of God which will, as we'll see, be fulfilled in a special way in the Church. And that really gives us the cue or the clue to the responsorial psalm for the week.

So the responsorial psalm for this Sunday is Psalm 137, which is all about the Babylonian exile and how the Jewish people would sing a song while they were in Babylon that they would never ever forget Zion. They would never forget the city

of Jerusalem that had been destroyed, and also expressed the hope that one day they would return. So it's a beautiful psalm. I'll just read the first couple verses there. It says this:

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.

Which is another name for Jerusalem.

On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!

Alright, so in other words, Jerusalem, as we'll see, is going to become a kind of a symbol for the city of God and for the hope that one day the Messiah would come. And not just gather in the people of Israel throughout the world to a new Jerusalem, that he would usher in a new creation, an age of salvation in which their sorrow and their sadness would be no more. Alright, so that's the responsorial psalm for the week. You can see the Church really preparing catechumens there to kind of hear the history of Israel, to live it out in their own lives, to kind of re-experience it so that when they come to the feast of Easter they can kind of experience the longing that the Jews themselves would've had for the coming of the Messiah, for the new Jerusalem, the new creation and the resurrection from the dead.

Alright, in closing then I would just like to end with a little bit of wisdom from the living tradition of the Church. You know the Gospel reading for this week was John 3:16, the famous affirmation of why God sent the Son into the world in order to die on the cross and what's the reason for that. And one of my favorite traditions about this, one my favorite writings about the crucifixion and about this verse comes from St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas was living in the 13th century. He's one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever produced, and in his great writing called the *Summa Theologica*, it's like a summary of all theology, St. Thomas asked the question, well why exactly did God give us his only beloved Son? Why did Jesus have to go to the cross? Wasn't there some other way he could've saved us? And it's interesting because St. Thomas says in the summa that God actually could have saved us in a number of different ways. In other words, he had the power to forgive us simply by declaring us forgiven if he would want to do that. But in his divine wisdom he chose to save us through the passion and death of Christ through the cross, precisely because the cross is the perfect sign of his love for us. So I'll read these words to you. This is from St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, he says this:

St. Augustine says (*De Trin.* xiii.): *There was no other more suitable way of healing our misery than by the Passion of Christ... In the first place, man knows thereby how much God loves him, and is thereby stirred to love Him in return, and herein lies the perfection of human salvation; hence the Apostle says (Rom. 5:8): God commendeth His charity towards us; for when as yet we were sinners ... Christ died for us... Fourthly, because man is all the more bound to refrain from sin, when he bears in mind that he has been redeemed by Christ's blood, according to 1 Cor. 6:20: You are bought with a great price: glorify and bear God in your body... It was accordingly more fitting that we should be delivered by Christ's Passion than simply by God's good-will.²*

In other words, what St. Thomas is saying there is if God would have simply declared us forgiven, that would've made known to us his goodwill toward us. But by sending his Son to die on the cross he manifested to us that he not only has good-

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3.46.4

will toward us, but that he loves us with a divine love. That he loves us with a sacrificial love. That he loves us with a love so great that he's willing to mount the wood of the cross, to be lifted up on the wood of the cross, to taste the suffering and the shame of this horrific death so that we might know that he loves us, that he loves us, and that he wants us to love him in return. So that would move our hearts to not just thank him for being forgiven, but to love him in return. And that's really what I think the Church is doing on this Fourth Sunday of Lent. It's trying to prepare us for the mystery of Christ's passion, so that we might not only know that God loves us, but so that we might be moved to love him in return.