

THE GIFT: A reflection on Lent 4B
2 Chron 36: 14-16, 19-23
Eph 4:2-10
Jn 3: 14-21
March 15, 2015

We've reached mid-Lent. The Readings invite us to rejoice. We're ready, aren't we? Lent's purple is usually replaced by "rose" today, a sneak peak of Easter's glory. However, I'm told there are no "Get out of Lent free" cards left at the Welcome Table.

The Word for today focuses on rejoicing and giving. At the time when Gutenberg was printing the first bibles, Christians were taught to dread God's awesome wrath much more than rejoice for his mercy. An incident that happened then teaches us that God's Love is even more awesome. One day, Gutenberg's daughter, Alice, picked up a piece of vellum in the printing room. With only one line printed on it, it read, "God so loved the world that he gave"... That's it! Alice kept the printed sheet.

When she thought of God being so loving, her face shone with joy. Her mother asked, "What's making you so happy, dear?" Alice showed her the printed line. "So, her mom said, what was God's gift?" "I don't know," replied Alice, "but if God loved us enough to give us something, then why are we so afraid all the time?"

Today, we're invited to accept the GIFT that God lovingly gave the world and continues to give to each and every one of us, each and every day. God's Love is so awesome that He trusts us with

- the GIFT that forgives, as in the 1st Reading, with the freeing of Jews to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem after a long exile in Babylon;
- the GIFT that saves, as Paul writes in Ephesians, "You have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the GIFT of God."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yes, but... why aren't people rushing *toward the light*? Why are they ignoring freedom from condemnation AND the eternal life promised in today's gospel? John's answer is luminous in its clarity: "People prefer darkness to light because of their evil deeds."

If this were a bible-thumping church, the long list of deeds we keep hidden somewhere, would begin here, accompanied by wailing, mea-culpas and breast-beating. There's that ancient fear and dread of divine wrath again...

When will we ever learn? It's not as if we were unaware of a loving and merciful God. What we fail to remember is that salvation is a GIFT. "Nor is it a reward for anything you have accomplished," writes St. Paul.

"If only it could be our accomplishment," we'd say during good times. We'd proudly point to our successes, our virtues and improvements, our earnestness to fasting, penance and sharing. But salvation isn't of our own doing, is it? And it's definitely not a result of our own efforts.

On the other hand, when we're depressed, we moan, "What have we accomplished? Nothing, nada!" If only we had been more worthy, if only we had tried harder, if only...

Sadly, we miss the point. We stumble around in the dark, without the hope that our plans had inspired, stripped of the "spiritual insurance" intended to save us, purged of the pretense that we had no need of redemption anyway.

When will we ever learn that, when we acknowledge the futility of our efforts, we're a hair breadth away from openness to God's Gift. How to abandon ourselves to the Creator's grace still remains the mother of all

questions for us.

*True, we can fear the Light, we can dread exposure to love. We can resist. Fear and dread still are huge obstacles to freely abandoning ourselves to God's saving love gifted to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus."*¹

Unseen obstacles block our path toward the Light. We struggle with them day in and day out. Our Elect (Tingi) and Heather and Jessica, both candidates to full communion, are doing their part to come to the Light. They meditated with the Initiation Team on ways to remove obstacles that keep us from God's GIFTS. At yesterday's five o'clock mass, we celebrated Tingi's 2nd Scrutiny, one more step in his spiritual journey. Let us hold all three candidates in our hearts as they prepare to receive God's GIFTS in abundance at the Easter Vigil.

Remember Alice, Gutenberg's daughter? What if any one of us found a similar line of print: God loved ME so much that He gave... Why are we so afraid all the time? Here is a short poem "to sit with", a hint on how to complete our own line of print.

My child,

I know it is difficult to love

I know it is difficult to forgive

I know it is difficult to suffer

but look I am taking away your heart

and in its place

I am putting my heart

now I will be suffering

now I will be forgiving

now I will be loving in you

my heart is beating in you ²

¹ Adapted from an article by SLU prof. John Kavanaugh, S.J.

² A Poem to Sit With, by J. Janda, on the SLU website.