

**SPIRITUALITY**

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
so everyone who believes in him might have  
eternal life.

**Gospel**

John 3:14-21; L32B

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“Just as Moses lifted up the  
serpent in the desert,  
so must the Son of Man be  
lifted up,  
so that everyone who believes  
in him may have eternal  
life.”

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.

For God did not send his Son into the  
world to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be saved  
through him.

Whoever believes in him will not be  
condemned,  
but whoever does not believe has  
already been condemned,  
because he has not believed in the  
name of the only Son of God.

And this is the verdict,  
that the light came into the world,  
but people preferred darkness to  
light,  
because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things  
hates the light  
and does not come toward the light,  
so that his works might not be exposed.  
But whoever lives the truth comes to  
the light,  
so that his works may be clearly seen  
as done in God.

*Year A readings may be used, see Appendix A,  
pp. 271-273.*

**Reflecting on the Gospel**

In our modern American culture, Sundays are often punctuated with football. We know that Mass attendance can even be influenced by the time of the local game. The excitement, joy, and anticipation of the game can even distract otherwise intent Mass-goers! More than a few times we have heard homilies incorporating a reference to Sunday football. It's become something of a national religion practiced in varying degrees by fans. Some time ago, in the end zones of various football games, dedicated believers displayed a simple message: "John 3:16." For those who were not familiar with their Scriptures, many went to look it up later in the day, and perhaps that was something of the point. And it is that verse that appears in today's gospel.

This Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called "*Laetare Sunday*," from the Latin meaning "to rejoice" or "to be joyful." Though it might appear to be a football term (Rejoice Sunday), the term comes from the Introit (Isa 66:10); it's unrelated to football! Still, it might seem odd to "rejoice" in Lent, but that exhortation is a reminder, or rather a foreshadowing, of Easter. It is as though Easter itself is breaking into the Lenten season this Sunday.

For the gospel we continue from last week with another reading from John that includes the famous passage cited in football end zones. The first two Sundays of Lent we heard Mark (the temptation of Jesus, and the transfiguration of Jesus). Last week was John's version of Jesus overturning the money changers in the temple. Today we have Jesus and Nicodemus, a story unique to this gospel.

The passage that many use to sum up the gospel is simply this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." The profundity of this statement can be lost by its pithiness. We proclaim a God of love, not a God of condemnation. And this love results in God sending his only Son, Jesus. The starting point of our theology is, then, love.

Though many today and throughout history seem to prefer a God of judgment, a God of condemnation, today we are reminded that our God is love. And God's love is eternal, expressed in a never-ending life he wants for each of us, where the relationships and bonds we create in this life are never broken. On this *Laetare Sunday*, where we read John 3:16, may the joy experienced by those at a football game remind us of the joy we have at Easter, when the promise of eternal life is fulfilled.

**Living the Paschal Mystery**

The gospel addresses eternal life quite clearly as God's intention for us. But prior to that famous passage (John 3:16), we hear Jesus tell Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up (crucified). Only by means of death is eternal life opened. Unique to this gospel, Jesus' death is often referred to in metaphorical ways, like "lifted up" or even "glorified." For the Gospel of John, Jesus on the cross was a moment of glory, almost devoid of explicit suffering. For example, John never mentions the scourging of Jesus. Even Jesus' final words from the cross, "I thirst," can be taken more as metaphorical or symbolic than a literal expression of suffering.



Ultimately, John does not focus on Jesus' pain, or "how much it hurt." Instead, the cross is glory and the path to eternal life. For his followers, belief in Jesus is the means by which they receive eternal life. As we journey through Lent, it might be fruitful for us too to focus on Jesus and our belief in him. He represents and is himself the incarnation of God's love for the world. As followers of Jesus how do we represent God's love for the world?

### **Focusing the Gospel**

*John 3:14-21*

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and like so many others who heard Jesus, he is fascinated by this Worker of wonders and extraordinary Teacher. He arranges to meet Jesus at night, so as not to attract undue attention.

Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the Son of Man and how eternal life comes to those who believe in the Son of Man. This is a radical notion unheard of in Judaism of the time. Jesus invokes the image of Numbers 21:4-9: As God directs, Moses lifts up the image of a serpent on a pole to heal those who suffer from a deadly plague caused by the bite of serpents. The Son of Man, too, will be "lifted up" and become the means by which eternal life comes to those who believe in him. God gave his only son to the world in an act of love, the ultimate act of self-gift.

### **Focusing the First Reading**

*2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23*

Today's first reading is a watershed moment in Judah's history. Prophet after prophet called the leaders of the southern kingdom to return to the moral anchor of their covenant with God, but Judah's unfaithfulness has led to their destruction and seventy years of exile from Jerusalem. But God uses an unlikely source—Cyrus, the king of Persia—as the means for rebuilding Jerusalem and the Jewish nation and reestablishing the Jews' covenant with God.

### **Focusing the Responsorial Psalm**

*Ps 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6 (6ab)*

Psalm 137 is the soul-wrenching lament of refugees forced from their beloved city into slavery. The exiles of Jerusalem vow to remember the land they left behind and to never lose hope in the Lord who does not forget them.

### **Focusing the Second Reading**

*Eph 2:4-10*

In his eloquent letter to the Ephesians, Paul echoes Jesus' words to Nicodemus: that we owe our salvation not to anything we have done or accomplished but only to the great mercy and grace of God.

### **PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS**

How does living a faith based on trust and gratitude differ from living a faith based on condemnation and fear?

How do Jesus' words to Nicodemus challenge attitudes and perspectives of others?

Have you ever felt that, at some point in your life, you were traveling through a "strange land" in your life? How did you find your way "home"?

How have you unexpectedly experienced the mercy of God?

In what ways do we prefer "darkness" to "light"?