

**Homily – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year B (*Laetare*)  
March 15, 2015**

**2 Chronicles 36:14-23:** Even in the midst of their exile, the people of Israel receive help from an unexpected source: the king of Persia.  
**Psalm 137:** "By the rivers of Babylon ... let my tongue be silenced, if ever I forget you, Jerusalem."  
**Ephesians 2:4-10:** We are saved not through any work of our own, but by God's free gift: mercy, faith, grace.  
**John 3:14-21:** "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... light triumphant over darkness."

Two years ago, this weekend, the Church rejoiced to hear those familiar Latin words: "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus papam! I announce to you news of great joy: we have a Pope!*" And as a humble, self-effacing Argentine bishop named Jorge Mario Bergoglio bowed before the gathered people of Rome – not to mention the hundreds of millions more watching on TV or on the Internet – asking for their prayers and blessing upon his ministry, we experienced not so much a new teaching or doctrine, but a new focus. The Gospel according to Pope Francis is expressed as a message of "tenderness", "simplicity", "going out to the periphery", and perhaps the two words most deeply connected to his message and witness: "*joy*" and "*mercy*". On Friday, Pope Francis formally announced a Holy Year, dedicated to the theme of "**Mercy**", to begin on December 8, 1965 – marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council – and concluding on the Feast of Christ the King, November 20, 2016. Not surprising coming from a man, who has described himself as follows: "I am a sinner, one upon whom God has looked in mercy and chosen." When elected Pope, he responded: "*I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.*"

How fitting, then, that in our second reading today, we should hear these powerful words from the Apostle Paul: "**God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive together with Christ – for it is by grace, by God's free gift, that you have been saved.**" (Eph 2:4) Indeed, this theme of the free gift of salvation is at the heart of our Scripture today. We are reminded that salvation cannot be acquired by our personal effort. Rather it is graciously offered by God – ours for the receiving. Salvation can only be freely given, and freely received. It can never be earned or claimed as a right.

The understanding of the meaning and implication of the saving work of God has evolved throughout what we fittingly call “salvation history”. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Chronicles – the last book in the Hebrew canon of Scripture – we find a recapitulation of the entire history of Israel. Today’s text focuses on the sinful history of the people leading to their exile, and on the promise of deliverance from an entirely unexpected source: a pagan king, Cyrus of Persia, who would restore them to their homeland. Although the people of Israel had suffered because of their idolatry and infidelity, sin would not be the last word. Liberation from slavery, return from exile, a chance to rebuild their lives in their own homeland: this was how they interpreted the salvation God offered them. It is, if you will, salvation as *human* flourishing; prosperity as a sign of God’s blessing.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, the understanding of “salvation” is taken to another level. Paul reminds us: **“by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your doing; it is the gift of God, and not the result of your works.”** Salvation is not something God owes us, because we have acted rightly, because we have followed all the rules. It is a gift: freely given by a God “rich in mercy”. But in order for that gift to be received, we have to desire it; we have to open it, unpack it, so that it can transform us from within. *We don’t do good deeds in order to be saved; we do good deeds because we are saved.* As Paul says: **“For we are what He has made us: created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared to be our way of life.”** So you might say that for St. Paul, salvation is primarily an *inner* reality, the orientation of our heart and will to God, from which good and loving deeds should naturally flow.

As Catholics, we believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, and that those two natures fully co-exist within his person. Jesus was not half-human, half-divine; he’s not a man pretending to be God, or God come down to earth temporarily disguised in human flesh. The prayer recited by the priest as he mixes the water and wine together at the altar expresses this complex idea beautifully: *“By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”* Jesus, fully human and fully divine, comes to awaken each of us to our human and divine vocation. So it is not surprising that for Jesus, salvation is all-embracing: it has to do with human flourishing in this world and eternal life with God in the world to come. It isn’t “either-or”; it’s “both-and”. In the famous words of John’s Gospel:

**“God so loved the world that he gave [us] his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)**

Another prominent Catholic – and modern-day saint – who made the news this week was Canada’s own **Jean Vanier**. He received the Templeton Award – the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in religion and spirituality – for his pioneering work as the founder of L’Arche, an international movement of 147 communities in 35 countries. At L’Arche, people with physical and intellectual disabilities live side-by-side with assistants who share with them not only physical care, but a daily life rich in mutual relationships. He is also the co-founder of Faith and Light, an extraordinary network of over 1500 communities of friendship, mutual sharing and support for the families and friends of those who live with physical and intellectual disabilities.

In receiving the award, Jean Vanier dedicated it to the most vulnerable among us: the unborn, the disabled, the elderly, the infirm, the dying. Marginalized in our societies, feared and rejected, they remind us of *our own* vulnerability and weakness, those things in ourselves we are reluctant to admit and embrace. Vanier’s philosophy and life experience have led him to the firm belief that when we learn to welcome and embrace these “least of our brothers and sisters”, they become a source of dialogue, of healing, of unity and of peace. They reveal the mystery of love at the heart of our families, our society, and our various faith traditions.

In a beautiful book, “**Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John,**” Jean Vanier conveys to us a deeper understanding of what the biblical view of salvation means and implies. In biblical terms, to *save* someone means to *pull that person out of danger*. It means to *liberate from oppression*, to *open the doors of a prison* and let the prisoners go free. It means to *heal* or to *make whole*. In other words, salvation isn’t limited to the fairly narrow idea of “who gets to heaven and who doesn’t”, as we have often supposed. Jesus comes to save us from the fears that close us up in ourselves. He comes to liberate us from violence, sadness and guilt; he comes to open our hearts to love. He was sent by God into the world so that all who believe in him, who welcome the gift of his LOVE in faith and in trust, may not perish, but may have eternal life.

Opening ourselves up to new life, to eternal life, to a life with Christ, is not a one-shot deal, a one-off decision. It is a lifelong journey, an ongoing pilgrimage from darkness into light. In today’s Gospel, Jesus shares these words with Nicodemus, who comes to visit him by night. Nicodemus is someone we should be able to relate to. He is a religious man, but also has lots of doubts; he wants to know and understand more about God, but does not want to be *seen* doing so. He feels

drawn to the Light from God that has come into the world, but like so many of his contemporaries, he remains hidden in the shadows.

Like Nicodemus, we too seek to know and love God better, but darkness still has its grip on us. What are the evils from which we need deliverance: as communities, as nations, as church? What are the areas of personal darkness in my life, which would benefit from the focused, pure light of Christ? One concrete way to ask the Lord to fix his flashlight upon some of the shadowy areas in our lives is in the discipline of confessing our sins and receiving the gift of divine forgiveness. Here at St. Monica's, we will celebrate this special gift of God's healing mercy this coming Thursday at 7 p.m., with a special Mass in honour of St. Joseph and the opportunity to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. As Catholics, we are strongly encouraged, during this Lenten season, to share in this saving encounter with God's all-forgiving love, to respond to this invitation to leave behind darkness and to embrace the light which is Christ.

As many of you know, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is frequently preached on, but little practiced. Why might this be? Why are we so afraid to emerge from the darkness, to confront our shadow, our failings and failures, our weaknesses and our sins? Perhaps it is because at some deep level, we fear rejection and judgement: from others or, even worse, from God. We struggle to believe the truth of the words spoken by St. Paul today, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he **loved us even when we were dead through our sins**, made us alive together with Christ – for it is by grace that we have been saved."

The problem is that we put the cart before the horse. We have the idea lodged somewhere deep inside us that God will love us *if and when we change*, when in fact, the truth is that God loves us *in order that we can change*. God is the one who calls, who takes the initiative; our task is to respond. Listen to the message of Jesus as interpreted once again by Jean Vanier:

***"I love you just as you are.  
Because I love you, I come to heal you and to give you life.  
Do not be afraid. Open your hearts. It is all right to be yourself.  
You do not have to be perfect or clever. You are loved just as you are.  
As you become more conscious that you are loved,  
you will want to respond to that love with love, and grow in love."*** (87)

The Gospel today reveals to us the depth of this love – truly "the greatest love of all", far beyond our capacity to grasp or imagine. "For God so loved the world that

he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” All we need do, it seems, is believe. But what does that mean?

Here too, Jean Vanier has interesting insights to share. Belief is not primarily adherence to a set of doctrines or reciting some creed. Underlying any discussion about the **content** of our faith – **what** we believe – is the vital question of **why** we believe, about our **relationship** with a God in whom we have placed our trust. In this sense, faith is a decision to trust in the person of Jesus: in his words and deeds, in his abiding presence in my life as Master and Friend, as Lord and Saviour. It is a trust that grows, just as a seed grows slowly and gradually, ripening into an unconditional surrender to God.

Salvation, the eternal life that God offers, does not refer only to something we will live after death; it is also the life of God given to us **today**. As we enter into relationship with Jesus and follow him, we receive the life that is in him. Slowly but surely, we are being transformed. We begin to see people as Jesus sees them; to love them as Jesus loves them; maybe even to see and love **ourselves** as Jesus sees and loves us. Transformed, we find ourselves able to do things that, humanly speaking, we could not do by ourselves: love our enemies, forgive indefinitely, be with the poor and the weak, be compassionate as the Father is compassionate.

Perhaps you have experienced some of this transformation in your own life – experiences when you **knew** that it **had** to be God working in you, that a power larger than yourself had taken over. What do some of these look like?

*-perhaps you found yourself able to be gentle when dealing with someone far less gentle with yourself;*

*-you worked through a relationship and brought about reconciliation, even where you felt hurt or even betrayed;*

*- you accepted the challenge of marriage or parenthood, with its joys and sorrows, including that of surrendering our loved ones into the arms of God;*

*-you made a difficult decision because it was the right thing to do – and stood up to the criticism or judgments you had to endure to stay true to it;*

*-you acknowledged you were wrong and humbly asked forgiveness of the person you had wronged;*

*-you sacrificed something important to you: free time, a gift or talent, your energy, or your own material goods – to help someone in need.*

So let us embrace this transformation to which the Gospel calls us, while recognizing that such works are not our achievement, but the works of God alive in us. “*Salvation is not about great achievements, but a great embrace. What we are*

*asked to do is surrender.*” Let us respond positively to Christ’s invitation to move: from darkness into light, from arrogance to humility, from selfishness to self-gift, from harshness to tenderness, from judgment to mercy, from sadness to joy. **Amen**