**Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year B**

**March 14, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 (The fall and restoration of Jerusalem.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 137 (Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 2:4-10 (When we were dead in our transgressions, God brought us to life with Christ.)*

*Gospel: John 3:14-21 (The light came into the world, but people preferred darkness.)*

The Old Testament contains two competing narratives that tell the history of the Hebrew people from their “Golden Age” under King David (roughly 1000 B.C.) until the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. One version appears in the First and Second Books of Kings, the other in the First and Second Books of Chronicles. The stories agree, for the most part, on both the historical facts and their interpretation. Both authors tell of the people’s many infidelities, which ultimately led to the destruction of their society and exile in Babylon. However, there is one critical difference between the two accounts. The Second Book of Kings ends with the destruction of Jerusalem, as if that is the final act of the drama and a fitting, if bitter, conclusion. After stubbornly disregarding God’s commandments and ignoring God’s prophets, the people finally get what they deserve. The end. But, the Second Book of Chronicles does *not* end there. It continues with King Cyrus of Persia sweeping in to conquer the Babylonians. Then, in a truly shocking turn of events, God inspires this pagan king not only to allow the surviving Jews to go back home to Jerusalem, but also to finance the reconstruction of their temple! So, while the author of Kings saw only darkness ahead for the Jewish people, the author of Chronicles, presumably writing at a much later date, saw a new day about to dawn, as the painful experience of exile was coming to an end.

There is no doubt that the Exile was a very dark time for all those who suffered through it. Today’s responsorial psalm captures the mood perfectly: “How could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten! May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember you not, if I place not Jerusalem ahead of my joy.” Not only were the Jewish people separated from their homeland, but they had also witnessed the destruction of their Temple, the epicenter of their worship and the greatest symbol of God’s presence among them. It would have been easy to think that God had abandoned them. And, that is precisely what the author of Kings implies in his narrative. He says that God tried to reach his people and turn them back from their sinful ways, but eventually gave up in frustration. The author of Chronicles likewise acknowledges that God sent his messengers “early and often,” only to have them mocked and their warnings despised. But, he also insists that God never truly gave up on the covenant with his people. In fact, the Chronicler reminds his readers that the Prophet Jeremiah had *predicted* that the land of Israel would be laid waste and its sabbaths would be lost for a few decades, only to be restored again by God’s mercy. If the Exile itself was part of God’s plan, then there had to be at least *some light* even in the midst of the darkness.

The Jewish people in exile managed to cling to that glimmer of light. They held onto their faith in a foreign land. The exiles even found new ways to practice their religion, without any means to offer the traditional sacrifices in the Temple. When they returned, they rebuilt the Temple and rededicated it, along with themselves, to God. But, even before beginning this massive restoration project, one of the first things they did was listen from morning until evening as a priest-Scribe read aloud from the Book of the Law, recalling the covenant between God and his people. They listened, and wept, and gave thanks to God. As a people, they had passed through a very dark night, and they could see the light, once again. However, the *fullness* of that light had not yet come into the world.

The Gospel of John portrays *Jesus* as the Divine Word and the “light” which dispels the darkness of the world. The light was actually present in the world from the beginning, long before the Word became incarnate, for all things came into existence through the Word. In the course of time, the “light” became at least partially *known* through revelation to the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then it was revealed further through the mighty acts by which God set his people free from slavery in Egypt. The light became much more clearly defined in the Law, and was repeatedly clarified and underscored by the Prophets. The light was reduced to a flicker during the Exile, but then burst forth again in the restoration which followed. Yet, it seems that all of this was a mere prelude to Christ coming into the world in bodily form. In him, the light shone so brightly that the only way to avoid its penetrating rays was to turn away. Sadly, many did just that. The Gospel of John says: “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.”

The same light of Truth that gives us life and hope also ruthlessly exposes everything within us that is opposed to Christ and his Gospel. And so, we are faced with a choice – *accept* the light and all that it brings, or *hide* from it and lose all the benefits that it promises. Each year, as we enter the holy season of Lent, the Church implores us to put aside our fears and *turn toward the light*. Together, we examine our conduct, our attitudes, our habits, our attachments, our relationships – in short, everything – to see what needs reform. We allow the light of Christ to shine into every dark corner of our lives, so that all may be exposed *and redeemed*. As St. Paul reminds us: “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, *even when we were dead in our transgressions*, brought us to life with Christ.” So, God did not wait for us to come to the light; he sent the light to us, even while we remained mired in sin. And Paul tells us why: “For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus” for good works. In other words, God made us for a purpose. He destined us for life and good works, and the light of Christ shows us the way. On this Laetare Sunday, let us embrace that light, and the hope that it brings.