

4th Sunday in Lent

Year B

Christ the Redeemer.

Our sins had made us exiles from God's kingdom.

But just as God sent Cyrus, the King of Persia, to bring his people back from Babylon, so in his great love he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to bring us back to the new Jerusalem 'to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it'.

(Readings: Chronicles 36: 14-16, 19-23. The wrath and mercy of God are revealed in the exile and in the release of his people.

Ephesians 2: 4-10. You who were dead through your sins have been saved through grace.

John 3: 14-21. God sent his Son so that through him the world might be saved.)

Does God love our world? – Now there's a question. – I'd warrant every angel, and every saint in heaven would answer with a resounding "Yes!" But put that self-same question to anyone who has lost a loved one to say, Covid, or a victim of terrorism, or of violent crime. Ask someone who has seen their world come crashing down around them. They may choose not to answer that particular question but, rather, pose another, a yet more basic question. "Would a *loving* God allow such tragedies to happen?"

For his part, Jesus would say that no matter what happens God loves our world. In fact, his exact words were:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him may not die,
but may have eternal life."

Of course, there were, and there will always be, those people who would argue with Jesus, saying that they just do not believe him; people who have experienced suffering at a very profound and deeply personal level:

"If God is love, then why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?"

To be perfectly frank and honest, much of the blame for human suffering is down to humanity. For example, think of such incidents as the dropping of the first atomic bomb. Neither God, nor nature, had anything to do with that. It was conceived, and built, and launched, by human intellect alone. So let's be fair, and attribute this kind of suffering to mankind; to man's greed for power and wealth, to *his* ignorance, his wilfulness, his sin.

There are, of course, other sources, other causes for suffering; suffering for which humanity is not responsible, or at least, not directly.

It is given that people do not cause earthquakes or storms. De-forestation aside, people don't directly cause floods or droughts. Neither do they make poisonous snakes, stinging insects, or biting animals. These are merely intrinsic environmental and biological elements of nature, built into the created order and structure of the universe.

Insurance companies have a phrase for such things. They refer to them as ‘Acts of God.’ Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, tornadoes and lightning strikes, tsunamis, and all suchlike occurrences, are all said to be, ‘Acts of God.’

I, for one, am not prepared to call them that, though, I have to admit, I’m not altogether sure quite what to call them. On the one hand, it could reasonably argue that these things would never have happened if our first parents, that is to say, Adam and Eve, hadn’t sinned against God in the Garden of Eden. After all, it was through their disobedience that death and misery were first brought into the world; brought in as God’s punishment. But then again, if that is correct, does it not follow that ultimately, suffering is down to God? – And so the circular argument goes round.

All we can know for sure is that suffering is truly a mystery; a holy mystery. And I suppose it will always remain so, at least for us in this world; in this life.

And yet, despite all the suffering and misery that comes to us, Jesus could, and would still, claim that God loves the world. He would claim this because he knows that God, his Father, *is* love, and that he sent him into this world for its redemption.

As well as from his Father, Jesus knew that love in Mary and Joseph. He was surrounded with both divine and human love. Before we can love, or even know the meaning of the word, we must first be loved. In this regard, Jesus was most fortunate. The love of his heavenly Father, and the love he experienced in his earthly home, proved to him that God does love the world.

Our own childhood may not have been as fortunate as that of Jesus, but we have all been loved to varying degrees. We have all experienced love at some level. We are aware that at our worst, we can be indescribably selfish and cruel. But we are also aware that at our best, we can, and do, perform heroic acts of kindness, and boundless generosity.

Victor Hugo wrote a story about a lost boy making his way across a cold and wind-swept wasteland. In the darkness, he stumbled over something. It turned out to be the naked and frozen body of a woman. In her lifeless arms was a baby, alive and well. The woman had removed her clothing and wrapped them around her child.

Happily, the story is fictional. Even so, we know such things really *do* happen. And if the love of sinners – which we all are – can be so unselfish, and so heroic, how much deeper, and how more intense, is the sinless love of Jesus, God-made-Man?

The story of the frozen woman’s sacrifice to save her baby helps us understand at least something of Jesus’ awareness and appreciation of the love of God the Father, and why he *could* claim, with all his heart;

‘God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but have eternal life.’