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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
22 March 2009

The Fourth Sunday of Lent (B)

The entrance antiphon of today's Mass seems quite out of place with the reading from the Second Book of Chronicles and the Psalm. Today's Liturgy begins with these words: "Rejoice, Jerusalem! Be glad for you, you who love her; rejoice with her, you who mourned for her, and you will find contentment at her consoling breasts" (cf. Isaiah 66:10-11).

Yet the chronicler relates to us today the capture and sack of the holy city: "Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects" (II Chronicles 36:19). How can we rejoice for Jerusalem when she has been conquered?

What is more, "those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon," where, as the Psalmist sings, "By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps" (II Chronicles 36:20; Psalm 137:1-2). How can we rejoice for Jerusalem when her citizens are either slain or carried away?

Given all of this, how can Holy Mother Church say, "Rejoice, Jerusalem?" She dares to utter these words because the Lord used Cyrus, King of Persia, as his chosen instrument, who said to the people of Jerusalem, "Whoever, therefore, among

you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him" (II Chronicles 36:23).

Cyrus delivered Jerusalem from the bondage of Syria, for which rejoice Jerusalem - and all who love her - is told to rejoice. Christ Jesus has delivered the new Jerusalem - the Church and all who belong to her - from the bondage of sin and death, for which reason we are told to rejoice.

Are there not times in each of our lives when we feel like exiles, as though the city of our life has been destroyed, either through the consequences of our sin or as a result of the drudgery of life (cf. Job 7:1)? Do we not feel like exiles when we feel our sin, selfishness and pride separate us from God and from those we love? Do we not feel like exiles when the trials of life beset us: when parents divorce, when a loved one dies, when we suffer hunger, when find ourselves in financial difficulties or suffer the ravages of nature?

In such circumstances we feel uncomfortable and out of place. We ask with the Psalmist, "How could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land" (Psalm 137:4)? Yet even in such times Mother Church says to us, "Rejoice, Jerusalem!" She calls us to sing with joy!

How is it possible to sing the praise of God in the midst of such suffering and pain? From the experience of my own life, I tell you, it is possible, for it is the Lord himself who gives

us a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God (cf. Psalm 40:4).

As Saint Paul tells us today, it is precisely because of the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus, because "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" (Ephesians 2:4-5). Even when we hang up our harps in anguish and sing no more on account of suffering and pain, the Lord does not leave us in darkness, but beckons to us with his own marvelous light, to sing anew (cf. Psalm 137:).

The Lord is present even - and especially - in the darkness of life. The Son of God took on our flesh to share our sufferings, to endure our death and to rise triumphant over sin and death. The Father has lifted up his Son before us so "that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:16). He was lifted up on the Cross to heal us and make us whole, and it is from his Cross that his light shines forth, calling to all who will turn toward his light.

This raises the question for each of us: will we turn toward the light, toward the Cross, or will we flee from the light?

We know that "people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil" (John 3:19). So often we know our sin and yet we refuse to humble ourselves before the Lord and

implore his mercy and forgiveness. We hide from him, thinking somehow that if we stay in the darkness, so long as his light does not shine upon us that will be at peace. But our experience proves this false. The more we hide from his light, the greater our pain becomes. It is only by stepping into his light, by seeking his mercy, that our hearts find peace.

Pope Benedict XVI once described humanity as a beggar for love.¹ And Saint Augustine said that to sing belongs to lovers. Given that both are truth, where there is no love, there is no song.

Let us not leave our harps hung on a tree in our anguish; let us not abandon our song. Let us, rather, look to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and see there the depth of love so freely given for us so as to receive a new song.

When we behold his love we again hear the words of Jesus: "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" (John 3:16).

When see his love - and the great and incomparable extent to which he has given it - how can we not respond in kind with love? How could anyone look upon Christ crucified and not be moved?

¹ cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 29 March 2007.

Look to the Cross and there you will see the cause of our hope, the font of our joy and the consolation of a wounded heart.

To be a beggar is to be vulnerable and open. If we know ourselves to be beggars for God's own love, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable to him; we must open our hearts and our lives to receive his grace, the grace that fills our soul with a new song, the song of love. As it is with our love for one another, so it is with our love for God: it cannot be forced; it must be freely given and freely received.

Many come here to the altar of the Lord each week where the sacrifice of Calvary is re-presented to us and we present it again to the Father. Here, the Lord comes to us; here, we can find the depth of his great love; here, we receive a new song.

But many come each week and never experience anything because they refuse to open their hearts to experience all that the Lord wishes to give them here, at his altar.

My brothers and sisters, if you want to know the joy of the Lord, if you want to take up your harp and sing again, look to the Cross and open your heart to his love! Receive his Body and Blood humbly and give yourself to him, because he has given himself to you.