

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Psalm 136

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

Today we celebrate Laetare Sunday. The word “Laetare”—which in Latin means ‘rejoice’—is taken from the entrance antiphon prescribed for today’s Mass. Now past Lent’s halfway point, we are invited to take courage from what the Lord has already been doing in us during this fast of forty days. As we draw closer to Easter—and to the Lord who bears our burdens—our Lenten load is lightened. And so the violet vestments of Lent are mixed with the white vestments of Easter, resulting in the rose-coloured vestment I am wearing today (this morning a young girl called me “Priest Barbie”!).

The words which Jesus speaks in today’s Gospel are quite striking: he tells us that the light has already come into the world... yet humanity preferred the darkness to the light, because our deeds were evil. And indeed, how much darkness we can see in our world – and, if we’re honest, sometimes in our own hearts.

Upon sitting with this image in our Gospel passage, it occurs to me that there are different kinds of light. For instance, we’re all familiar with harsh, fluorescent kinds of lights that make you feel like you are in a terrarium – like some kind of exotic species on display. And I suspect that some people think that the light of Christ is like this – the kind of light that you just use to display things that are pretty, like holiness and virtue. A light for those who have everything together and are ready for everyone else to stand around and view them. Perhaps they perceive his light to be that same harsh and hygienic blue-white light – a light that reveals every flaw, that is merciless – almost hunting for defects to show the world.

Now, the truth can indeed feel like that at times. There is a certain merciless quality to the truth. It searches the heart, it probes the mind – it reveals our flaws and weaknesses. It unmask us and sometimes can leave us feeling weak and vulnerable.

But the light of Christ, the truth that is revealed in Christ, is not harsh and humiliating, it does not degrade us or make us less human, like an interrogation light in a cold cell. The light of Christ, his truth, is given to us in love. It is because God so loved the world that he sent the light, his truth, among us – to set us free and to give us new life. And so the proper metaphor for the light of Christ is the candle, or in the case of the Easter Vigil, the fire, the flame.

And so Church insists that we use candles to light the altar, not light bulbs. And that’s not just out of a sense of nostalgia that we use candles – it is because they are a fuller and richer sign and symbol of the light of Christ. I can think of at least three ways in which this is the case.

First, notice how the candle produces light: by sacrificing its life. The candle does not give us light without burning up its own body, its flesh. And so it is a sign to us of Christ, who spent himself in order to give us the light of his truth. The candle becomes a sign to us all that the truth, the light of Christ, is found and sustained in sacrifice, by taking up our crosses, as Christ did, and following his example of selfless love.

Secondly, notice how the light of the candle is not harsh, but rather soft and warm and inviting. Rather than revealing every flaw, candlelight hides flaws – that’s why they are favoured for dates and for other romantic settings. Everyone looks better by candlelight! In a similar way, the light of Christ, his truth, enlightens our world gently and with dignity and respect – showing us, not so much our flaws, as the beauty of the calling that we have received in Christ to become the adopted sons and daughters of God. St Paul tells us in our second reading today that God is rich in mercy, and that in Christ he showers us with immeasurable riches and kindness. Christ, the light of the nations, has come to earth not as an enemy, but a friend.

Lastly, candles give off heat when they burn; unlike fluorescent fixtures, they cannot do otherwise. Plenty a server has figured that out the hard way – hopefully not losing any hair in the process!

Saint John Paul II was fond of saying that we followers of Christ are called to always speak the *truth* with *love*. Just as for a candle there can be no light without heat, so for a Christian there can be no truth without love. Jesus shows us that love and truth are not opposed, but follow from one another. It is not that love is irrational and that truth doesn’t have a heart. No, instead, just as light and heat are united in the candle, so God’s love and truth are united in Christ. Jesus shows us that the greatest truth is his love for us, and the greatest love is the truth about him. In essence, Jesus shows us is that the truth is biased, horribly biased, in our favour. He is the truth, and he is unabashedly rooting for us, favouring us, loving us.

“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son ... so that through him, the world might be saved.” God does not give up on us! He continues to lift our weary hearts with the promise of faith, hope, and love. If we approach the Lord with humble honesty, we need not be afraid of the light. And he calls us to be men and women of the truth in the same way, rooted in love for others.

I think this last point is so important to all of us, who on the day of our baptisms were given a candle and told to keep the flame of faith alive in our hearts, so as to be a light to the nations. We were not given fluorescent lights, or glow sticks, for that matter. We were given a candle. And the candle is a rich symbol of the way that we are called to enlighten the world: speaking the truth, not being afraid to speak and live what is true and right and holy – but always doing so in love and with deep concern for others – never using honesty as an excuse to be cruel.

Jesus tells us that the one “who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God.” In just a few short weeks we will gather around the Easter fire at the vigil – the Easter candle will be lit from its flames – and then slowly, that light will travel to all corners of the Church as hundreds of candles light up and fill the church with a warm glow. This warm glow is meant to be more than a nice feeling lasting a few moments – it is designed to be a true sign and symbol of who we are and the way that we embody the light of Christ, the light of his truth and love, that has come into our world.

So in these days of preparation for Easter, let us open ourselves to the grace of Christ offered that to us in a special way during this season, and rekindle within us the light of truth we received at our Baptism. Let us nourish it with prayer and love for others – so that as we renew our faith in the risen Christ this Easter, we may truly rejoice—truly ‘laetare’—and share that joy with the whole world.