

4th Sunday in Lent + 10 March 2024 + 2 Chron 36:14-23 + Eph 2:4-10 + Jn 3:14-21

As we have been examining the Covenants that God made with Israel in our 1st readings during Lent, today's 1st reading shifts to the sad reality that while God always kept His promises to Israel, time and again, they did not keep their promises to God in the Covenant. As the author writes, *the people added infidelity to infidelity*. So what was God to do with them, and, by extension, what is God to do with us when we too fail to be faithful to Him?

Well first, as we hear, God gave them many chances to do better. *Early and often*, the author says, *did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people*. But they refused to repent. In fact, *they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy*. Now here we come to a difficulty; how are we to understand the “anger” or “wrath” of God that we often hear of in the Old Testament, especially in light of our 2nd reading and Gospel scriptures today?

Well, because there is no imperfection in God, we know that God's “anger” cannot be the kind of uncontrolled rage that so often characterizes human anger. Rather, we should understand God's anger as the proper response to an offense against the utter holiness of God. It's kind of like the natural anger that rises up in any good person when we hear about violence against children or the innocent; except, as we said, in God, there is no hint of sin in such anger. And this is not just an Old Testament thing—even Jesus had such righteous indignation, as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel in His cleansing of the Temple.

And so while failing to keep one's Covenant promises to God has real consequences, yet we shouldn't think of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the exile of God's people into Babylon in our 1st reading today as simply vengeful retribution. Rather, these historical events were in a sense inevitable. Remember, God's people swore to Him by a Covenant to keep His life-giving commandments. But in reality, they lied: they chose to break the commandments, and so also chose their own demise. God wrote a sort of “logic” into Creation—into life—and made it known to us in the 10 commandments. But when we choose to go against this logic—that is, choose to *sin*, then the final result is death.

And so our 1st reading today stands as a stark warning to all nations in all times about the consequences of living contrary to God's beautiful logic of creation, including our own nation today (but we'll save that for unsettling warning for another day). Rather, I'd like to move to the question of what can be done when we humans break our Covenant with God? Is there any hope for us? This was a question that really haunts the whole of the Old Testament. Indeed, in the book of Daniel, we hear the righteous Azariah give voice to this anguish and pray: *we have sinned and transgressed by departing from you...Your commandments we have not heeded or observed, nor have we done as you ordered us for our*

good. Therefore all you have brought upon us... you have done by a proper judgment...For your name's sake, do not deliver us up forever, or make void your covenant...But with contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received... for those who trust in you cannot be put to shame.

So already we see here toward the end of the Old Testament a glimmer of hope for those who are contrite and who put their faith in God's mercy. But the full answer is only made known in the coming of the New and eternal covenant in Jesus Christ. And that brings us, fittingly, to our New Testament readings today. We hear in today's much-loved Gospel from John ch. 3, that God loves the world so much that *He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.* God could have justly condemned us for failing to keep our Covenant with Him. But that was not His will. For *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.* And that is really good news for us! St. Paul adds in our 2nd reading that *God is rich in mercy, and so saves us through faith in Christ as a pure, unmerited gift of God.*

We'll speak more about just how Jesus saves us as the mediator of the New Covenant next weekend. And we already spoke about the saving Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Eucharist. So today, I'd like to focus on the way God has made for us to be reconciled back into Covenant/family relationship with Him after we sin—the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the earliest days of the Church, it was largely assumed that a person couldn't possibly sin gravely after Baptism. But with time, it was realized that that sadly wasn't the case. And so sinners were welcomed back into the Covenantal family of God, the Church, through a long and very public process of purification known as the "order of penitents." With even more time, this public process became individual and private, as we thankfully have it today.

Now, lesser sins damage our relationship with God. They are still wrong, but such "venial" sins can be repaired through a genuine act of repentance, such as sincerely praying the penitential act at Mass. For example, if a man is impatient with his wife after a long day, but then sincerely apologizes and empties the dishwasher, there is no lasting damage.

But if he is nasty night after night and shows no sign of desire to change, that relationship may become damaged beyond repair. Such "mortal" sins, or actions done after Baptism which are gravely evil, done with full knowledge and deliberate consent, must be forgiven through the Sacrament of Penance. We sometimes forget that this Sacrament has 3 steps. The 1st step cannot be overlooked: it is to be "contrite"—to have heart-felt sorrow for our sins. Next, we must "name it and claim it"—we must confess our sins before the church's minister. We don't have to go into excruciating detail: the goal is honesty, not humiliation. Finally, we must have the "firm purpose of amendment:" that is, the genuine desire to not commit these sins again, and the willingness to make satisfaction for them by works of penance. Penance is not punishment, but rather a prescription for how to avoid such sin-sickness in the future, and, in a very small way, a making of amends for the harm done.

Finally, just as in example of the impatient husband above, the whole family is harmed by his sin—including the children, so our individual sins damage not only our relationship with God but with each other in the Church as well. For this reason, reconciliation involves not just “me and Jesus,” as some would have it, but must also include His whole Body: the Church. Jesus gave the authority to forgive sins to His priests when He breathed the Holy Spirit upon His apostles after His resurrection. The exact manner in which this reconciliation has been practiced in the Church might look a little different through the centuries. But one thing is certain: all of this was done, as St. Paul say, so that God *might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*