

**Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year B
(Mar. 22, 2009)**

Laetare

We call today Laetare Sunday. Laetare. It's a Latin word that means "Rejoice." Rejoice in this season of Penance. Why do you think the Church tells us to rejoice when it is asking us to pray, fast, and give alms to show that we repent the wrong we have done, that we want to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel? The answer is not because Lent is half over. No, it's something far more important than that, something crucial to our lives as Christians. Our readings today give a good idea why the Church tells us to rejoice.

It sounds ridiculously simple to say it, but we rejoice in the fact that God loves us. God loves us! And God doesn't just love us. God loves us with an overwhelming love. Jesus says it in that famous statement to Nicodemus, John 3:16: "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." God so loved the world that he sent his only son, he sent what was most precious to him. Now I am actually tempted to stop right there and simply say, Take the statement, "God so loved the world," and pray about it. Say it over and over again. Ask God to help you to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of so great a love and remember it was for you, it was for me, it was for all of us. God's love is universal. We might say God's love is catholic. God so loved the world! No one, absolutely no one, nothing, is excluded.

The first reading from the Second Book of Chronicles tells us something of God's love as well: that it never leaves us, that God never forgets us. That's something to pray about, too.

For the ancient people of Israel history was simply a record of God's self-manifestation. That's what the Books of Chronicles are all about. God becomes visible in powerful acts of salvation. God becomes known in these acts; whoever sees and experiences them can know God in them. And that's what that first reading is all about. The people had experienced many misfortunes, including exile. They had been conquered by successive

empires, their land and temple plundered. Their country made desolate. But still they came to understand that God was with them. God loved them. God saved them. They were his very own people.

Many people in the world today, like those Israelites of old, have experienced some form of exile, separation from home, family, or livelihood. Often this is accompanied by fear, loneliness, even a sense of abandonment by God. Think of the many immigrants who cross our borders both legally and illegally. Think of those who have lost their homes or family members in Iraq and Afghanistan. Think of the people of Israel today, both Jews and Palestinians, who seem to find it impossible to live together in peace. Think of people in our own country who have lost loved ones in the wars or all those who are suffering now because of the financial crisis. Feelings of bitterness and despair are common. And yet the Church says, "Rejoice!" It takes a lot of faith, a lot of trust in the love of God to rejoice even in the midst of misfortune. The Books of Chronicles tell us how it happened for those people of old, a witness to the fact that it can happen again in our time.

The second reading gives us still another take on the love of God. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians says, "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 in Christ – by grace you have been saved." And at the end of the passage, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them."

"We are God's handiwork." I have seen it translated as 'We are God's work of art.' God's work of art. Let's play around with that idea for a little bit. If we are God's work of art, what kind of an artist is God? Is he like a painter or a sculptor whose statue or painting is a finished work of art and just stands there for all the world to admire? I would say, "No." He is more like a singer who has a song to sing. Or he is a dancer who has a dance to dance. The song only exists as a song as long as the singer is singing. Or the dance only exists as a dance as long as the dancer is dancing. God is the singer. We are the song. Or God is the dancer. We are the dance. God is constantly singing us into existence. God is constantly dancing us into existence. If God were to stop singing or stop dancing we would cease to

exist.

In today's Gospel Jesus assures us that God's love extends to all humanity. God's singing and dancing does not stop with us but extends to the whole world and always has. The Gospel also tells us that it is in the sign of his cross that we see in to the heart of God. And when we look into the heart of God what do we see? Mercy and compassion, not condemnation. Anyone who but looks with eyes of faith to God will be saved. This happens by grace, St. Paul says, not by any effort of ours. It comes through the gift of Christ sharing with us the life of God.

Can we possibly want any more reason that that to rejoice?