

Proclamation of the Gospel

The Lord be with you.
And with your Spirit.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to St. John.
Glory to You, O Lord.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. 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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world but people preferred darkness to light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come toward the light so that their works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that their works may be clearly seen as done in God.

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.

Homily by Fr. Gerry Hurley

I guess one of the most featured lines in the whole of the New Testament comes up in the Gospel today. It's one of the most publicized verses, indeed. You know, at those great sporting fixtures, you regularly see somebody behind the camera they manage to come with “John 3:16,” right? In other words, go look it up with your Bible, right? In your study guide or in your reference book, which is the Bible. What an interesting character. You know, for years I thought well, maybe a nut — you know maybe a bit of a fruitcake or something, you know — going out with a sign. And now, I have totally revised my perspective. I think what an interesting individual. What a great character. Holding up that sign. It makes me ask myself, “What am I doing to make that proclamation?” The most profound proclamation in the New Testament probably.

That God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that all who believe in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life.

That's kind of different to what I learned growing up. You know, the experience growing up was maybe that He is there to condemn me. Maybe it was just the people. Or, maybe it was just my family or my teachers. Or maybe it was yours as well. But, that whole idea of a God that was there judging and evaluating us. One of the earliest things we learned is God is everywhere, right? That was not a good deal. Man, I didn't need Him to be everywhere. In fact, there were a whole lot of places I didn't want Him to be. But, He was there before me anyway. And that wasn't very exciting. That wasn't good news. And then my grandmother was there, as well, you know. To remind me that He was there ahead of us, and He saw everything anyway, you know. So it wasn't a great plan. And I wonder where was this good news? Because this is really

important, you know. Somewhere along the way, we got this image of God that maybe we had to pacify Him before He would forgive us. We had to make up for these actions, and do all of this good, and then maybe God would be merciful and forgive us. I know that was the notion I had. Any of you have that? Sure.

It was a very Old Testament experience. Because the Old Testament, your brothers and sisters in the Old Testament, that is what they felt. We've got to appease God. Hey, He's chapped with us right now because we didn't do what He wanted us to do. And He is really pretty upset. So, we're going to have to appease Him and bring Him around, you know. It was such a small notion of God. I mean, we turned Him into a likeness to ourselves. We flip the tables. We were created in His image and likeness. And immediately, we start turning it around and our God is in the image and likeness of us. No bigger than any one of us. Wow, what a horrifying thought! And, then we saw Him, not surprisingly, as a judgmental God — a picture of Him being angry, stern, unforgiving, unrelenting. And then maybe, if we kind of changed of behavior, He might be pleased with us again, at least for a while.

Then, the whole advent of Jesus in the world. There was even a sense, sometimes, that well, Jesus coming into the world, that He would make up for our sins. And by taking on our sins, He'd make it good for us in the relationship with the Father. Well, that's a distortion of the truth. Because we see in the Gospel today, this was God's initiative. God sent His only Son into the world. Did you hear that? That's pretty important. The initiative came from Him. That God started this. He desired for it to be an expression of Him and His love. Amen.

He desired for it to be an expression, not of His power, but of His love for us. God chose the approach of love, and not power. God acts, not on His own behalf, but on our behalf. It's a very different understanding of the Gospel and how important it is. God is the Father who is not happy unto all of His children are gathered. We have very different notions of that in the Christian experience. God is so intensely engaged in calling every body. It was not just one nation. It wasn't just the nation of Israel that He called. Yes, He invited them to be first, and to be an example. But, they didn't handle it. Didn't take care of it. And He extended to every body in kind. Not just some, all of His people. And so, as we see in today's Gospel particularly, the passage shows that God was all inclusive. His love is not directed just to one nation only. And it is not directed only to those who are good. That was the notion that the Pharisees held in the time of Jesus. God's love is directed only to those who are good. Absolutely untrue.

His love is directed, not toward just one nation, but every nation. And it is directed, not just toward the good, but the bad alike. Because He causes His sun to shine on the good and the bad alike, the just and the unjust. Because that's who our God is, not like us. Very distinct, terribly important, good news because it changes everything. It changes that whole perspective that we have of Him. He's waiting to get us. Yeah, He's waiting to get us, but in a really good way. Not in the way that I had conceived when I was growing up. He wants to get me, alright. He wants to get everybody. He wants everybody to come. Father, that I should lose nothing of what you have given me. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing of what You have given me and entrusted to me. That is the plan of the Father.

And so, how do we look at those realities that we've been talking about — having a balance in our lives as we journey through Lent, right? We reflected on — first week, we reflected on having a balance between what I want to do for God, and what I'm gonna sacrifice, and how I'm gonna get God to be responsive to me. And I'm going to do this, and this, and I'm going to pray

this, and I'm going to give up this for Lent, and I'm going to take on a whole lot of initiative. But, what about the balance? What about what God wants to do for me? How important is that balance! God has great desires for me. We're certainly studying in our book throughout this Lenten season. What is His plan for me? What does He want to bring about in me, and for me? Pretty important. And we looked at the importance of having a balance between these two realities. Between what I want to do for God, and what God wants to do for me. They're pretty important.

And, then secondly, we looked at the traditional examination of conscience for us as Catholics. We're very adept at that, examining our conscience, finding the fault. And we've been well trained in it. But, what about finding God? What about it an examination of consciousness, not conscience. Examining our awareness. Do I bring God into my life? Do I invite Him to be a part of my daily life? Or, do I just take care of business in the morning with Him, and then move on and take care of my own stuff? Wouldn't that be ridiculous to just operate that way? I take of God in the morning, and then I visit Him again in the evening. And in part, that's the way we have been trained. We say our morning prayers, and then we say our evening prayers. What about God during my day? A consciousness of Him. That He is with me, He is in me, He lives in me, and He encourages and supports me. A consciousness of Him. Do I invite Him to be a part of my work?

Then, we looked at last week, the idea of St. Benedict's Rule for the community. How important is it balancing my work and my prayer? And, how does my prayer become my work, and my work become a part of my prayer? That's becoming conscious of God in my life. That prayer is not just something I say or do in the morning, and then again in the evening. But I invite God to be a part of my whole day — when I'm driving down the street, when I'm headed to a job or an interview, when I'm headed to meet with people — God, be with me. Help me to be conscious of Your abiding presence. And so, then my work can become my prayer. It is not a substitute for my prayer, but it becomes my prayer, and then my prayer becomes really enriched by that reality.

And so, this week I wanted to look then naturally at the obvious one that comes up in the Gospel — a balance between light and darkness. People say, "Well, we're supposed to be all light." Great! Wonderful idea! That would be pretty neat if we were capable of doing that. But, we're not. Why? Because of original sin and all of these other influences in our world. We have a natural tendency to do it my way. And the balance, trying to have the light in my life. The Gospel put it in other simpler terms. Did you catch them? The first part of the Gospel — love. God so loved the world that He is only son, so that we might know that love. The second part of the Gospel — the contrasting piece to darkness. Condemnation, right? Condemnation was the second part of the Gospel. And we naturally asked the question, "How can you have love and condemnation? How can you reconcile those realities? It's pretty easy, really when we look carefully. But, if we look at it purely on the surface, then we'll have great difficulty reconciling love and condemnation. Because God is not the one condemning. Condemnation does not follow from God's action. It follows from our response to His invitation. That's where condemnation comes from. It's not from God, it's not from His action. It's from our response to His action. God condemns no one. People condemn themselves by adopting the negative attitude. His invitation is to come to the light, to live in the light, to receive His love. People who choose not to, condemn themselves. God doesn't. He invites us to live in His light. God sent His light into the world. If people get lost, it's because they do not accept the light. It's pretty

important. The fault is not God's. The fault is that He has given us the ability to do it. And He has given us what we need to be responsive to it.

A visitor was once traveling through a great Museum, and the Gallery had a great series of well-known, beautiful paintings. They were universally acknowledged to be masterpieces. At the end of the tour, the young man said to the guide. He said, "I really didn't think much of these old pictures." To which his guide said, "My dear good man," he said. "The pictures are no longer on trial, only the people who come to view them." What he had just given information on was his lack of understanding or appreciation for good art. The Bible is no longer on trial. For 2000 years, it has been powerfully effective and transformative in the lives of people. It's not on trial any longer. The people who read it, or choose not to read it, are on trial. It's a great challenge. Wow, what a wonderful expression that Gospel is!

Imagine if we just taught from that perspective, and not about God and He's going to get us, and judge us, and all the other little things. That He is on our side. That He desires for us the fullness of life. That He sent His only Son into the world that we might have life. And then, John 3:17 is equally important. How would you believe John 3:17 in this world in which we live?

That God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

Would you think we believe that as a Christian people in the world? Wow, listen to a lot of the televangelization. It would seem like the only way we can get people on God's side is through fear. Whatever happened to His love? That God so loved the world.

So this, week we look at the reality — light and darkness, or love and condemnation — and where they come from. They come from choices, not from God's decision. How important they are. And the reality is that sometimes we prefer to live in darkness. Why? Because we're not willing to overcome those deeds, and so the darkness remains. For example, I can say, well I'm prejudiced. And I can confess it over and over again. But if I do nothing about it, what am I doing? What is the point? What is the point in my confession, if I do nothing to alter the darkness? I can live in lots of varieties of darkness. And, I can acknowledge them freely, but if I'm not willing to change the behavior, how would I expect to live in the light? So, remembering this week, a balance between the light and the darkness. Where do I live comfortably with darkness in my life? He desires for that change.

It's naturally a nice preparation for our Penance Service next week. An opportunity to be reflective on being conscious of Him and His presence in my life. And then, the light and the darkness, and to what extent do I keep the darkness away from Him so that He cannot transform it into light? Because He is not going to force it on any one of us. It's free. It's generous. It's benevolent. The invitation.