

HEARERS OF THE WORD

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137 (136); Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son

[Jesus said:] John 3:14 “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In John 3:16, we touch one of the best-known and best-loved passages in the Bible. Not everyone understands and/or likes what comes before and after – the imagery in vv. 14-15 is difficult for us and the exclusionary tone of vv. 17-21 disturbs us today. The context of the time of writing can be of some help.

KIND OF WRITING

The passage is a composite meditation, reflecting the teaching of the Johannine community. The story starts with Nicodemus and continues with Jesus’ speaking, but these words are really the *theology* of the later community.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Light is often used in the Old Testament



for God’s guidance and word (see the Psalms especially). However, the “big” background to our passage is Moses in the desert and the sacrifice of Isaac.

(i) *Isaac*. The wording in John 3:16 echoes the story of the (not actually required) sacrifice of Isaac, one of the “texts of terror” from the Bible. (We heard Genesis 22 on the Second Sunday of Lent.) It is echoed here to extraordinary effect: Abraham was tested to see if he had the heart to give his longed-for son back to God, in an apparently immoral, incomprehensible and even contradictory request. The story borders on the absurd. In the Fourth Gospel, the writer turns it around: we learn that God has the heart to give his beloved Son with the added shock that the sacrifice is carried through and the Son of God dies on the cross. The centrality of the cross and resurrection in John’s teaching was one of the causes of the splits both *from* Judaism and *within* the Johannine community itself. Abraham was in everybody’s mind: mentioned by Jesus, Paul, Hebrews and all four Gospels at different times.

(ii) *Moses*. In the book of Numbers, ch. 21, there is a mysterious story of the people’s rebellion and God’s punishment by snake bites. “And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” (Numbers 21:8-9) For our purposes, the symbolism

Thought for the day

What does it mean to be saved? We have the secular sense of being rescued or spared somehow. The root meaning of the word in Greek and Latin is to be healed. So, the beginning is some recognition of need, of something fractured, unwell in my life. It includes faith in God who wants us to be both whole and holy, fully alive. The big “sickness” is death itself—from which we are saved/healed through God’s love to us in the lifting up of Jesus in death into resurrection.

Prayer

Heavenly physician, heal whatever is us is dead or wounded or unfree that we may know the wholeness, freedom, life and joy of the Gospel.

lies in the paradoxical fact that the cure resembles the disease. This paradox holds in a good deal of psychological treatment and even in the use of pharmaceuticals. The use of it in today’s Gospel carries the meaning that the “cure” for the death of each human is Jesus’ facing death on our behalf.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) The language used here echoes the words of Jesus in the Synoptic gospels: “No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lamp stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.” (Luke 8:16-17) “No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lamp stand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.” (Luke 11:33-36)

(ii) There is extensive use of light symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: “He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” (John 1:7-9) “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:5) Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” (John 12:35-36) “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.” (John 12:46)

ST PAUL

For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2Corinthians 4:6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

From the First Letter of St John, it seems clear that the community for which he was writing experienced tremendous division and schism – a rejection of the spiritual guide of the community and his teaching. “Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.” (1John 5:10) Those who do not believe are those who did once, but now have turned away. The focus is not on anyone who does not believe but on those who once did and have consciously abandoned the faith.

Verse 14 In this gospel, “lifting up” means the cross (physical) and the resurrection (spiritual).

Verse 15 Faith / belief is very much at the heart of the Fourth Gospel. The last beatitude in 20:18 reflects this: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

Verse 16 The key words are “loved”, “gave” and “believe”. Eternal life means life now in Jesus, not simply a future reality. Authentic life from and in Christ might be a good translation. Cf. *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* (John 17:3; see also John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2-3.)

Verse 17 This verse underscores the deeply positive purpose of God.

Verse 18 These are they who once believed and then consciously and culpably have rejected life in Christ.

Verse 19 The Gospel writer will return to this difficult theme in chapter 5. *Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.* (John 5:24) The image of light is full of potential (John 1:4-5, 7-9; 3:19-21; 5:35; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 46); it is matched in this Gospel with the language of darkness and night (John 1:5; 3:2, 19; 6:17; 8:12; 9:4; 11:10; 12:35, 46; 13:30; 19:39; 20:1; 21:3).

Verse 20 Here we have an echo of Jesus’ sayings in the Synoptic gospels.

Verse 21 The positive conclusion to the whole teaching also echoes synoptic material.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus speaks of himself being lifted up, a term that can mean a physical lifting, or also exaltation. By this play on words the evangelist explains to us that Jesus’ gift of himself in the passion was a glorious revelation of love, despite all its injustice and brutality. Bring to mind occasions when the love shown by Jesus in his passion was a sacrament of God’s love for you.

2. It would be very cushy for us if we could be a source of life to others without cost to ourselves. The true life-givers know that they need the generosity of being lifted up by giving their lives so that others may have life. Recall when you have had that generosity and give

thanks for others who have been like that for you.

3. We receive life from God when our faith enables us to trust in God’s love for us. We give life to one another when the love between us is trustworthy. Recall memories of that kind of trustworthy love. For whom have you been able to be a ‘Jesus person’ and give a love that another could trust? Who has shown that kind of love to you and been for you a sacrament of God’s love?

4. When people cannot find a love in which to trust they are truly in darkness rather than light. Perhaps you have had such moments. What was it like to be in that darkness, and what was it like to come into the light again when you found a love you could trust?

5. People loved darkness rather than light...so that their deeds may not be exposed. Judgement and condemnation are very inhibiting forces and we easily slip into them. Occasionally we meet someone who is non-judgemental, who does not come into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved. What has it been like for you when you met a non-judgemental person? What has it been like for you, and for other people, when you have been able to adopt a non-judgemental approach them?

PRAYER

O God, rich in mercy, you so loved the world that when we were dead in our sins, you sent your only Son for our deliverance.

Lifted up from the earth, he is light and life; exalted upon the cross he is truth and salvation.

Raise us up with Christ and make us rich in good works, that we may walk as children of light toward the paschal feast of heaven.

We ask this through Christ, our deliverance and hope, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Genesis 9:8-15	Noah	Ps 25 (24)	1 Peter 3:18-22	Mark 1:12-15
Lent 2	Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 14-18	Abraham	Ps (116) 115	Rom 8:31-34	Mark 9:2-10
Lent 3	Exodus 20:1-17	Moses	Ps (19) 18	1 Cor 1:22-25	John 2:13-25
Lent 4	2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23	Exile	Ps 137 (136)	Eph 2:4-10	John 3:14-21
Lent 5	Jeremiah 31:31-34	New Covenant	Ps 51 (50)	Heb 5:7-9	John 12:20-33

For by grace you have been saved through faith

Eph 2:1 *And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energising the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest...*

Eph 2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, 5 even though we were dead in transgressions, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you are saved!— 6 and he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 it is not from works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

A good question to ask is what happened for us in “the great events that gave us new life in Christ”? Our readings today invite such a reflection. The salvation in the first reading is quite material, even political. The Gospel talks of healing, love, eternal life. This reading takes the reflection a step further and focuses in a very helpful way on the *effects* of salvation on us *believers*: love, made alive, grace, raised up, kindness, saved, gift. Any single expression would repay attention: in a word, “we are what he made us.”

KIND OF WRITING

Ephesians has the following outline:

- 1:1-11 Introduction
- 2:1-3:21 The world wide reconciliation
- 4:1-6:20 Ethical teaching
- 6:21-23 Conclusion

Ephesians is a teaching document in the recognisable form of a Pauline letter. In the course of theological part of the letter, 2:1-22 is devoted to salvation and reconciliation in Christ. The preceding verses are given above to clarify the contrast with salvation in Christ.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

It is commonly thought that Ephesians is a second generation writing of the Pauline school, based closely on the letter to the Colossians. The dedication “in Ephesus” is uncertain, not being found in the best and oldest manuscripts. Although Paul did live Ephesus on and off for many years, there seems to be no personal contact or reminiscence. In any case, it is addressed to a church or churches in the Pauline tradition.

The letter was used in Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* and possibly may have been known to Clement of Rome. Given that it seems to have been written after the collection of the Pauline corpus, a reasonable date would be the late 80s or early 90s of the first century.

RELATED PASSAGES

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3-7)

For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects—bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:9-14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 The preceding verses are all by way of introduction and finally the subject of the main verb appears, God, rich in mercy. For the same expression earlier, see 1:5, 7-8 and 1:18.

Verses 5-6 The writer uses compound verbs: made alive *with*, raised *with*, seated *with*, all interrupted with the exclamation “By grace you have been saved” which will reappear at the start of v. 8. Forgiveness of sins is central to that being set free and being made alive. The writer is very close here to Rom 6:1-4.

Verse 7 Why did God do all this for us? Simply to disclose his grace and kindness. The Greek is quite musical here, capturing the enthusiasm of the writer: *charitos* (= grace) autou en *chrēstotēti* (= kindness) eph' hēmas en *Christō* (= Christ) Iēsou.

Verses 8-9 Notice the pile-up of genuine Pauline expressions and teaching: grace, faith, gift, works, boast. Notice, as well, the absence here of justification. Instead, salvation is the key term. In Paul, the precise meaning of works is not any achievement of my own but the identity markers of Judaism (circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath observance). Here, however, it is widened to include any effort of our own.

Verse 10 The language shifts from “you” to “we”: we are God's workmanship—the Greek is *poiēma* (lit. doing). There are good works to be done, but always under (prevenient!) grace.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Ephesians assumes we have all made a journey from being “sick” to being “saved” (lit. healed). It might help to recall your own journey to salvation.
2. The enthusiasm of the text for the astonishing love of God is palpable. When did I last experience that for myself?
3. You are God's creation, his *poiēma*, God's *work of art* (NJB)—and in you God delights! We may bask in that delight.

PRAYER

Creative God, we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hands. Breathe on us again your breath of life and restore the beauty of your image, that our lives may flourish again in your great love, your kindness, your grace to us all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Whoever is among you of all people, may the Lord his God be with him!

2 Chr 36:14 All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

2 Chr 36:15 The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; 16 but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

2 Chr 36:19 They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. 20 He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.

2 Chr 36:22 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: 23 “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the Babylonian Exile in all its dimensions. Looking for parallels in other histories can be a help. In Irish history, the Great Famine was such a watershed, culturally, socially and linguistically. The Babylonian Exile finished off a project that was dying anyway, the Jerusalem monarchy under Zedekiah. It unleashed a tremendous dislocation causing tragic loss of life and

great suffering. When trying to understand where was God in this disaster, the prophets proclaimed that God had always remained faithful—Israel on the other hand had failed.

During the Exile, Israelite life was substantially reconfigured. We may summarise thus: they went out Israelites, but they came back Jews. The exile unleashed energy, some of it destructive and some of it marvellously constructive. All was not at all lost, thanks to the great prophets of the Exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah. A new appreciation of God’s gracious fidelity gave the exiles courage and kept them faithful until the return was feasible.

KIND OF WRITING

Because the author was using in part biblical sources, we can compare the ending of the Chronicles with that of Kings (these two books are also a single work in Hebrew). The end of the monarchy in 2 Kings 25:27-30 is more bleak than the final chapter of Chronicles.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Chronicles, as one volume, was written about the fourth century BC by someone with a large vision of Israelite history and a deep theology of God’s continued faithfulness to Israel. The book (that is, our 1 Chronicles) begins with Adam and goes on to offer no fewer than nine chapters of genealogies, taking us to the time of Saul and the Philistines. The rest of work takes us from the united monarchy, right up to the end of the Exile under Cyrus. Our verses close the book.

RELATED PASSAGES

The sense that this tragedy was also a moment of grace can be found, for example, in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Isaiah 40:1-2.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 Not only the leadership (Zedekiah in the previous verses) but also the priests and the ordinary people are blamed. Not, however, the Levites!

Verse 15 Jeremiah and Ezekiel, chiefly, but also during the Exile Second Isaiah. By the time of writing, the prophetic books had attained scriptural authority.

Verse 16 Wrath is not “free-floating” anger but God’s sense of justice.

Verse 19 The destruction of the Temple was not like the knocking down of a church; it meant God’s presence was gone and people no longer had access to God.

Verse 20 Slavery was the lot of the exiles, as we hear again and again.

Verse 21 Seven times ten is read as the payment of a just penalty. By closing with the completion of the punishment, Chronicles ends on a note of hope. Cf. Lev 26:34-39. The writer combines Jer 25:10-12, 28:3, 29:9 with Lev 26:19-21.

Verse 22 There is an overlap with Ezra 1:1-3a. Cyrus is somewhat astonishingly referred to as the Lord’s anointed (in Is 41:5; i.e. *messiah!*). However, the historical Cyrus was just as interested in control, except he planned it by local “autonomy” rather than by centralisation. The date of the decree is 539.

Verse 23 The decree explicitly talks of the rebuilding of the Temple. In other words, sin can never be the last word: there is always, always, God’s faithful forgiveness. The final words (“Let him go up!”) indicate that the process of redemption is ongoing.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The great Exile has considerable potential for today for reflection on the steep and swift decline of the Catholic church in Ireland. What brought this about? How much did a departure from the Gospel of service contribute to the present depressed state? Can we see the redemptive hand of God in this? Prayer of contrition and conversion.

2. Personally, it should be possible to look back over dark periods in my life, which at the time looked bleak beyond redemption, and see nevertheless the hand of God moulding me anew in his grace. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER

God of faithful love, when we feel paralysed, it is your fidelity which gives us hope; when we see no way forward, it is your love which gives us courage. Set us free once more from all that holds us in thrall that we, your sons and daughters, may live by your truth, so that all we do may be done in you.

We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137 (136); Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

THE THREE READINGS

There is a terrific portrait of God's renewing mercy on all three readings today. Each time, something has happened to make it real for the faithful.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The lectionary chooses the most obvious psalm, one dealing clearly with the bitter experience of the Exile, a psalm which really gets to the heart of the pain.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

The great Exile in Babylon was a huge watershed in the life of ancient Israel, comparable perhaps in Irish history to the Great Famine. Naturally, it caused a lot of soul searching and questioning. In a brisk reading, the whole seventy years are compressed into three paragraphs.

Second Reading

Ephesians 2:4-10

What is God like? Before the Mystery we all wonder and we hope. In today's reading, there is very warm and inviting picture of God, full of goodness and love, grace and gift. It is a message we can never hear too often.

Gospel

John 4:14-21

The reading today is a favourite passage: God so loved the world. After the lovely thoughts, the reading gets more difficult. It may help to remember that the writer is not talking about anyone at all who does not believe, but rather people who really experienced what it is to encounter Christ and then walked away. All the same, a challenging reading.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 15 March

Isaiah 65:17-21

Exultant optimism is perhaps not the mood of the times, but, it is the mood of this passage from Isaiah. One line anticipates the Gospel: *no more will be found the infant living a few days only*. Even the exag-

gerations are delightful.

John 4:43-54

John's Gospel tells this familiar story with an intriguing twist: the parent is first called a "court official," then a "man" and only towards the end, "the father." Roles can dictate who we are!

Tuesday 16 March

Ezekiel 47:1-9,12

"Awash with life" might be a good description of Ezekiel's "vision" of the Temple. Exuberance is everywhere: *And their fruit will be good to eat and the leaves medicinal*. The Gospel takes up the water image in a remarkable vision of healing.

John 5:1-3,5-16

As you listen to this story, you might bear in mind the corresponding one about about the man born blind in John 9. Under that pressure, the man born blind becomes stronger; in this Gospel, the man crumbles and betrays Jesus. What does being under pressure for the faith do to me?

Wednesday 17 March

St Patrick, bishop and missionary

Jeremiah 1:4-7

The reading fits nicely with the feast. Jeremiah was called as a young man and so was Patrick — each a prophet in his own way.

Romans 10:9-18

This marvellous reading from Romans challenges us particularly today: how will they hear of him?

Mark 16:15-20

The Gospel is for worldwide proclamation — in the past certainly but even more so today, however difficult the conditions in a globalised world.

Thursday 18 March

St Cyril of Jerusalem, bishop and doctor

Exodus 32:7-14

In this disconcerting story, God is furious that the people have so quickly abandoned him. Moses reminds God of who God is and so God relents, thanks be to God.

John 5:31-47

This compact reading can upset us today because of the robust comments of Jesus. In reality, we are eavesdropping on the later conversation between Christians and Jews. The evangelist parades before us three of his wife "witnesses": Jesus' own deeds, the Scriptures and, finally, Moses himself.

Friday 19 March

St Joseph, husband of the BVM

2 Samuel 7:4-5, 12-14, 16

God's fidelity *through time* is expressed in his commitment to the family of David, of which Jesus will be born.

Romans 4:13,16-18,22

Abraham trusted against all the odds — as did his later descendant Joseph.

Matthew 1:16,18-21,24

Joseph of the Gospels reminds us of Joseph of Genesis, who dreamed and who saved his family.

Saturday 20 March

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Jeremiah, always in difficulty because of his calling, places his full and total trust in God. The psalm captures it well: *Lord God, I take refuge in you*.

John 7:40-52

Again, there is a contemporary ring about the range of opinions and the discord triggered by the person and presence of Jesus. What do I believe? What difference does it make?