

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Laetare Sunday

Homily by Fr. Bob Flannery

Today we observe—through video live streaming-- the 4th Sunday of Lent, which is known as Laetare Sunday. The Latin word “Lent” means **springtime** and the Latin word Laetare means **Rejoice**. And as we can see, liturgical color of the vestments this Sunday is “rose” or pink, a festive way of showing that our Lenten Season is more than halfway over.

However, these last days of Lent have been such as no other since many years before. How are we to rejoice when our lives are turned upside down due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic? There are an increasing number of infections and deaths as a result of the worldwide COVID-17 virus including in our own country, state and immediate area. Many people are without work, businesses are hurting, schools are closed, many important events have been canceled, and plans changed and postponed. As we well know, many restrictions are now in place to stop the spread of the virus which wisely, but unfortunately, keep us at a distance from each other physically.

Yet, here we are worshipping today to illustrate that our spiritual connection and closeness is still present, not just through our usage of visual technology, but also through our shared common faith and humanity, and finally and certainly through our prayers and concerns for each other is being illustrated in a variety of ways. While not everyone is able to receive in person the sacred Eucharist during this time of isolation, through our Spiritual Communion unites us with Christ and his Body in this unusual and challenging time.

The Lenten button being used at Saint Francis Xavier this year, and shared with the Newman Community as well, has the word “Unity” on it underneath an ashen cross. How prophetic that word choice was which was originally meant to help draw factions together in our country, our families, our church, and everywhere else where there is division and discord. Now the button has even greater significance as it bids and reminds us all that we are all in the present health crisis together and, united, we must all do what we are asked, in order to stop the spread of this dangerous virus.

So how do our prayers, hymns and readings for Laetare Sunday give us guidance during this difficult time? The Opening Prayer tells us to hasten towards the solemn Paschal celebration of Easter with eager faith and prompt devotion. The Paschal Mystery means that we must walk through the darkness of sin in our lives, dying to ourselves, as Jesus did through his passion and death on the cross. We cannot jump to the joy of the Resurrection without first embracing and overcoming the difficulties of life—including our present crisis-- without the help of God and one another.

The First Reading tells of the choosing of David, the young shepherd boy, to be the new king of Israel. The former king, Saul, was unfaithful to God and his commandments, and a new king was needed to replace him. All his talented brothers were not chose, but David, the shepherd boy and the least likely one, was picked for the task. God sees not the exterior, but the interior; God’s ways are not our ways; in this epidemic, God is calling us to comply with the guidelines of the present emergency and to say,

“Here I am, Lord. I come to do your will”, words of our gathering hymn, to work together in order to put an end to this tragic situation.

The Responsorial Psalm tells us once again that, with the Lord as our shepherd, there is truly nothing we shall want if we but trust in his love and mercy.

We are reminded in the Second Reading that, as Christians, we are children of the light and whoever follows Jesus through his suffering and rising will have the light of life.

And finally, the Gospel reading points out that so often we can be blind to our own self-righteousness, sinfulness, and selfishness. We can even be blind to the mercy God freely gives us when we believe Jesus is the promised Savior who alone can and does save us from our own self-centeredness and pride. Even though each one cannot receive the Eucharist at this time or have the Sacrament of Reconciliation readily available, God’s mercy, presence and love is still and always with us, surely saving us. Our Lenten penance this year is to be present to the many sacrifices we are called upon to make during this time of epidemic, embracing the necessary restrictions placed upon on.

We therefore can rejoice this Sunday, even amid a horrible pandemic, because we know not to be afraid since Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is also the Light of the world who shows us the way to unite, especially in difficult times.

I saw on a television station yesterday, the saying “Alone Together”. But I would add: “Alone Together; Together in Christ, United for all the world”!