

Archbishop Lori's Homily: St. Patrick Parade Mass

Fourth Sunday in Lent/ Laetare Sunday

St. Patrick Parade Mass

*Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
Baltimore*

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The Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally known as “Laetare Sunday.” It’s a bit like the 7th inning stretch in a baseball game - a time to stretch not our arms and legs but our souls as we look forward with joy to the celebration of Easter.

Of course, this presumes that we’ve been in the game to begin with, that we are taking Lent seriously by repenting of our sins, mortifying ourselves, and reaching out to the poor and needy with a prompt and cheerful charity.

Laetare Sunday also presumes that you and I really are looking forward to Easter, not as merely a nice day but as the day on which we celebrate the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death, the great event by which you and I have been saved.

By the way, if you haven’t been ‘in the game,’ that is to say, really observing Lent, it’s not too late. There can be a lot of action in the last two innings of a baseball game. So too the Lord can do a lot in my heart and yours during these days of Lent.

Many of you are here today to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day in advance and to take part in the 5K run and this afternoon’s parade. Sometime there’s also a bit of “rejoicing” at St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, though not necessarily the kind of

rejoicing the church has in mind.

Today the Scripture readings and the prayer of the Church speak to us of a deeper kind of a joy, a more enduring joy, the joy of which Pope Francis speaks: “Joy adapts and changes [he writes] but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done we are infinitely loved [by God]. (EG, 6).

And he goes on to say: “. . . joy flow[s] from the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ” (EG, no. 7).

This is the Gospel of joy that St. Patrick brought to Ireland and this is the joy that St. Patrick wishes for all of us, his sons and daughters: the authentic, enduring, life-giving, redeeming joy of the Gospel.

Indeed, St. Patrick preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ so effectively and authentically that he converted an entire nation and claimed it for Christ.

What St. Patrick did in the 5th century, another Irish bishop, St. Oliver Plunkett, did in the 17th century. A brilliant young man, Oliver Plunkett studied for the priesthood in Rome where he taught theology and ministered to the sick. Eventually the Holy Father sent him back to his native Ireland to be the Archbishop of Armagh and the Primate of All Ireland.

What he found was a church in disarray - a church decimated by religious persecution.

Archbishop Plunkett spared himself nothing, travelling to all parts of his diocese, preaching the Gospel, imparting to his people the fullness of the Catholic faith, strengthening those who were wavering because of persecution, and rooting out the

abuses that had taken root in the church in those difficult years.

In just over four years, for example, he confirmed 48,000 people!

With the passage of anti-Catholic laws by the British parliament, Archbishop Plunkett travelled to London in an attempt to ease the persecution against his people, but to no avail.

Realizing there was no way to avoid this intense persecution, he wrote: “These times are like those of the early church and I hope they will be made glorious and rich by the sufferings and martyrdoms of the Irish peoples, humble and devoted servants and imitators of Christ and his apostles . . . ”

And what drove St. Patrick and St. Oliver Plunkett to devote the whole of their lives to the preaching of the Gospel? And what was it that attracted generations of Irish people and still attracts people today - 2.2 billion Christians of whom 1.3 billion are Catholic?

The answer is found in today’s Gospel where Jesus is conversing with a learned but perplexed Jewish leader, Nicodemus.

Like modern men and women, Nicodemus was searching for answers. He was steeped in religious knowledge, he was devout, yet deep in his heart he wondered about the meaning and purpose of his life; deep in his heart he was dismayed by his half-hearted love of God.

He reached a point in life when he could no longer bracket his doubts and fears, and so he went to see Jesus, in the darkness of unbelief, searching for answers.

Jesus received Nicodemus with love but did not hesitate to tell him the truth. Jesus, in fact, chided him for his lack of faith and understanding but then revealed to

Nicodemus the heart of the Gospel he had come to preach: In that quiet conversation, Jesus revealed to Nicodemus the depths of the Father's love.

He spoke of how he was sent by the Father to die for us on the cross, how he would be raised up in agony out of love for us and how his obedient love would triumph over sin and sin and death.

And gazing at Nicodemus, looking deeply into his soul, he said: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes him might not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

This is the message that Patrick and Oliver Plunkett brought to Ireland. This is same the message that I deliver to you today.

As Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus unfold, it became clear that no one can indefinitely remain neutral or indifferent about the Gospel. Believing in Jesus, accepting his gift of self on the cross, means opening our hearts to his crucified love and allowing God the Father's mercy to transform us from within, to rescue us from our sins - that is - the works of darkness, to open the eyes of our soul to the light of God's truth and love, to transform us from those who love God half-heartedly into those who are truly disciples of Jesus and bearers of his love to the world.

Those who persist in unbelief, Jesus says, condemn themselves. As one author put it, "[People can become] so attracted to the darkness of their desires that they would not admit the light of truth and holiness, which Christ preached by word and example."

This is never an easy message for us weak and frail human beings to hear, for we are prone to sin and often we close the door of faith. If asked, we might say that we are a believer, but the faith Jesus asks of you and me is that we give him permission, to enter our hearts, there to converse with us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit

truly to change our hearts, to open them to the power of his mercy revealed on the cross.

When we are freed from the darkness of sin and error and convinced that God loves us in Jesus in a deep and personal way, then indeed the joy of the Holy Spirit overtakes us, a joy the world cannot give, a joy that is stronger than the polite persecution our society puts in our path, a joy that drives us to the Eucharist each Sunday, prompts us to confess our sins, inspires us to read Scripture and to pray each day, a joy that makes us active members of Christ's church, proponents of the Gospel in the modern world, and good servants of the poor and the needy.

"To consent is to be saved!" St. Bernard wrote.

Let us today, now, at this moment, give Jesus our consent!