

Fourth Sunday of Lent

14th of March 2021

Readings:

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent, traditionally called 'Mothering Sunday'. But that is very much an English tradition that is not in line with Dutch tradition. So I like to skip that for now.

The fourth Sunday of Lent is also called 'Half-Lent'. We are halfway through Lent on our way to Easter. The prophets and other bible texts have been preparing us for what is to come in Holy Week, as Jesus has been preparing his disciples for what is to happen to him: he is on his way to the cross. The Messiah is going to suffer and die, before he will rise again.

After a few weeks of contemplating the cross in Lent, the fourth Sunday of Lent traditionally brings us some joy; it is called Sunday Laetare, Sunday of Joy. As in Advent we had the third Sunday, called Sunday Gaudete, Sunday to rejoice; instead of a purple candle on the Advent wreath we had a pink one; today also the liturgical colour by choice could have been pink instead of purple. But far more important of course is today's message in the Gospel: a message of ultimate hope for us, for all believers: the Son of God has been given to us to save us and grant us eternal life. But before we are going to draw that conclusion we better read the text in context to make sure that we understand the text well.

What is Jesus doing and saying here?

We are listening to a conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews who came to Jesus by night. He wanted to find out who Jesus really was and what his relationship with God was. Jesus explains to Nicodemus that he knows God personally and that he comes from heaven; he knows what he is talking about, he has been there. Still the Jews, but also Nicodemus apparently, do not understand him, do not really believe Jesus. And then comes today's text and Jesus makes it even more difficult for Nicodemus to believe! Jesus tells him that the Son of Man, the Messiah, has to be lifted up, on the cross, like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.

Before we read the Gospel any further, let us find out what this referral to the Old Testament means.

The people of Israel are complaining against Mozes and against God for their suffering in the desert after they were able to leave slavery in Egypt; for their ungrateful behaviour God punishes them with a plague of venomous serpents and many of them die. The Israelites repent of their sins and beg God to take this plague away from them. God tells Moses to make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole; when someone gets bitten by a snake, they have to look up to the bronze snake and will be saved.

What a strange story! God telling Moses to make a bronze snake? We all know that making images was strictly forbidden in the Ten Commandments; but that apparently is not the point here. The point is that every Israelite that looks up to the image, or should we say looks up to God, gets a new or renewed life. Not because they worship the image, but because they look up to God.

Now back to the Gospel story, verse 15: Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Messiah has to be lifted up as well, on a pole, that is on the cross, so that whoever looks up to him, whoever believes in him, may have eternal life.

And to make sure that Nicodemus understands why this is all happening, Jesus says, and here comes one of the most central statements of the New Testament: '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.'

This statement is immediately followed by another one, also very important to understand this text well. Jesus says: '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.' So this is not so much about condemnation; it is about saving the world.

God actively wants to save the world; that is why he sent his Son into the world. That leaves one question: what about those who don't believe? The text clearly says: 'Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already.'

With that question we come to the last part of the text: what does this judgement look like? Jesus says about that: 'This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light.'

So people who love the light will be saved and people who love darkness are condemned? Is it all a matter of people making the right or the wrong choice? Do people have it all in hand?

Here we must have a look at chapter one of John's Gospel, verse 5: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' In the end the light will prevail, darkness will not overcome it. Light wins, darkness loses.

Of course, people can make a choice; that's their own free will. But mind you, in the end this is all in the hands of God's grace. God is making the final decisions. God wants the world to be saved. His grace is all around. His grace is as big as it can get. He gave his only Son to be nailed to a cross. Can that grace get any bigger?

People can make their own decisions. If they willingly and knowingly make the choice to turn their backs on God, to deny him and stay in the dark, then that will have its consequences. For all others there is the grace of God.

God's grace is unmeasurable. Starting point of the whole story is: 'God **loved** the world so much...'

Love and grace; that's what it is all about. Not so much condemnation, but love and grace.

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for your love, for your grace. We are unworthy of it all together, but still you love us. And you give us the opportunity to love you back. May the whole world recognise your love in Jesus and come to you. May we all become his disciples.