

Third Week of Lent
March 15, 2015
4:00 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. Homily
2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23; Eph 2:4-10, John 3:14-21

St. Paul was very fond of using the phrase “in Christ” to describe what salvation is all about. And it is in that tradition that in every Eucharistic celebration we declare that God’s honor and glory are revealed “through him, with him and in him.”

And because we’ve heard that phrase so many times, we may not have thought much about the fact that the phrase “with him” connects us: We too are to participate in the unity of the Holy Spirit, manifesting the glory of God in our world.

That’s what Paul is saying to the Ephesians: in Christ, we are brought to life, raised beyond mortality, and share Christ’s power to overcome evil. We are not only saved, but we are also called to continue the work of salvation.

John’s version of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus deepens that theme. We first hear Jesus’ explanation of his own vocation:

God’s love for the world could not be fully expressed by anything less than the Incarnation. Jesus described himself as the one sent to give flesh to God’s great love. In spite of what anyone might say, God doesn’t come to judge, but to offer the life that is salvation.

Now we get to the part that many Evangelical Christians love to repeat that may trouble our Catholic souls: “Everyone who believes ... will have eternal life.” All we have to do is believe? Does that mean we’ve made it because we recite the creed? It sounds like an insurance policy I have to have but I don’t know where to buy.

What is it that we are to believe? Jesus says that we are to believe in the Son of Man lifted up. There’s no doubt that he’s referring to the cross. And what is the cross but the

revelation of a God loving enough to suffer death without revenge, powerful enough to overcome death?

The Byzantine liturgy emphasizes Christ's victory by saying he used death to trample death, and we reflect that very same thought through our acclamation: "By your cross and resurrection, you have set us free." This is the mystery at the heart of Christianity.

In John's Gospel, the cross was Jesus' hour of glory (12:23). The message of today's readings is that it's not his glory alone. We, too, can share in his freedom and life if only we believe. But this belief goes beyond agreeing to dogma expressed in a creed.

It means that we bet our lives on the belief that Christ lifted up has overcome every evil and that we have nothing, absolutely nothing, to fear. That doesn't mean we'll never suffer or we'll never experience doubt, but that God's love, stronger than even death, is available to us, no matter what.

To believe that is to know that salvation changes everything. This kind of faith is a grace and an act of the will. This understanding of salvation leads us to be God's handiwork, continuing Christ's mission of mercy and healing in our world.