

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent**

Cycle B, 3.14.21

2 Chronicles 36:14-23/Ephesians 2:4-10/  
John 3:14-21

#### **REVERSING OUR PERSPECTIVE, RENEWING OUR FAITH**

You'll recall the famous winner of the 2007 Heisman Trophy and football hero of the Denver Broncos, Tim Tebow. His parents were Baptist missionaries in the Philippines and instilled in him a deep commitment to his faith. His athletic success and outspoken Christian faith made him a cultural phenomenon. His practice of genuflecting in prayer on the football field attracted a lot of media attention and became known as "Tebowing."



He also had written "John 3:16" under the black patch of paint used to cut glare underneath his eyes. Those of you with longer memories will remember that in many football games of long ago, there was often a man who used to hold up a sign in the end zone behind the goal posts. His sign had the same biblical verse in big, bold letters and numbers: JOHN 3:16. It probably sent more than a few curious fans to their Bibles over the years.

It's a beautiful verse about belief in Jesus that we just heard in today's gospel. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.* Of course, that's only part of the story.

You have to not only believe in Jesus; you have to follow him. In his book Breathing Underwater, spiritual author and guide Richard Rohr reminds us that Jesus doesn't say "Worship me," but he does say "Follow me." In other words, it's not enough to simply worship Jesus as the Son of God, or believe him to be such. You have to follow up that belief with action. So, yes, in Jesus and in our belief in him we have eternal life, and our action, our good deeds of love and kindness and mercy flow from that belief.

FOR **GOD** SO  
LOVED   
 THE WORLD  
JOHN 3:16

But there is something else that's critical in that well-known passage from John's gospel. It's not only about belief, about what we do. It's about something that God does. God loved the world. Too often, Christianity is presented in a way that makes it sound as if the story of Jesus is about God having to be pacified, or having to be persuaded to forgive. Many people carry around within them an image of an angry, unforgiving God and a loving, forgiving Jesus. But here is a text that tells us that God is the one who started it all. God sent his Son, even aware that his son will have to suffer. And why does God send his son? Because God loves us. God is not someone who sends Jesus in order that Jesus might be punished, or so that our sins will be wiped out. God is not an angry monarch, seeking vengeance or retribution

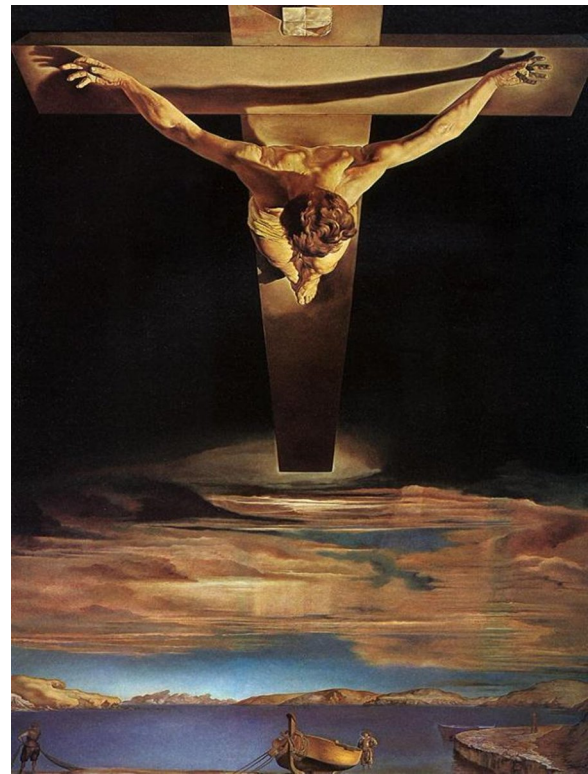
for our sins. God is more like the father in the prodigal son story, who isn't happy until his wandering children have come home. God is like the anxious housewife in the parable who sweeps the floor frantically under all the furniture until she finds the coin she lost, and then calls the neighborhood in to celebrate. God is like the caring shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes after the one lost in the wilderness and searches until he finds him to bring the stray home. God is love. That's the essence of the nature and being of God.

St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises offers a beautiful meditation on the life of the Trinity. He invites the spiritual seeker to use his or her imagination to envision the moment before Jesus' conception, looking upon our world. Ignatius asks: What would God see? *men and women being born and being laid to rest, some getting married and others getting divorced, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the happy and the sad, so many people aimless, despairing, hateful, and killing, so many undernourished, sick, and dying, so many struggling with life and blind to any meaning. With God, I can hear people laughing and crying, some shouting and screaming, some praying, others cursing.*

This is the world to which our Triune God sent his Son... out of love. God's action is motivated only out of love. And notice the scope of God's love. Our famous gospel passage doesn't say that God loved *Israel* so much that he sent his only Son. It doesn't say that God loved the *apostles and disciples and followers of Jesus* so much that he sent his only begotten son. It says that God loved the *world*. That's an easy thing to forget when we're tempted at times to see the Church as being against the world. We hear echoes of that when Church

leaders assume the role of "culture warriors," pitting themselves against the world they see only as a dark and fallen world.

Jesus tells Nicodemus in our gospel that the Son of Man must be "lifted up" just as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the desert, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For me one of the poignant images of the crucifixion is Salvador Dali's surrealist painting entitled "Christ of Saint John of the Cross."



You've probably seen the haunting image many times. The artist's view is not that of Mary and the beloved disciple and the women at the foot of the cross, who look up to gaze at the crucified Christ. The artist Dali takes an entirely different perspective. We are above the clouds, looking down at the top of Jesus' head and shoulders and arms, as the weight of his body pulls him forward. Beneath the cross we see the heavens which open up onto a scene of two fishermen tending their nets and boat.

We see a lake and its surrounding countryside. This was Dali's world in his country of Spain. From the lofty view of Christ's saving death, we catch a glimpse of that world beneath the cross.

For us believers, who look to the cross of Christ as the source of our salvation, we ought not glance up at the cross, in sorrow for the suffering Jesus endured. After all, St. Paul reminds us: *Christ, who once died, will never die again; death has no more dominion over him.* Our task is not to mourn for Jesus; our Lenten prayer is not a prayer of sadness in the death of Our Lord. The Spirit, who raised Jesus up, invites us to look down from the cross upon the agonies of our world. What does Jesus see from that lofty perspective? Is it not our world which he came to redeem through God's embracing love?



With Jesus, we see the stripping of the tree in a devastated rainforest... we see immigrant children at the border, frightened and alone... the name of the neighbor who was taken to the hospital... we feel the pain of the Syrian mother who cradles her little child to comfort his fears at the noise of bombings... we see the little child in front of a computer screen struggling for over a year with the technology that has replaced in-person learning... we agonize at the site of the Covid patient still suffering and dying from the virus.... the worker who has lost his job

and fears being evicted, eagerly awaiting some financial assistance that will bring relief to him and his family.

The first thing our prayer should do is help us to pay attention and to notice. Then, perhaps we can take on the perspective of Jesus as he hung on the cross, looking at the world which God created and loves, making it his dwelling place and us his sons and daughters. And Jesus does so in this very time of prayer as he embraces, on God's behalf, even the darkest places of our world and makes them God's own.



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