

Closing Prayer

O God, rich in mercy,
you so loved the world
that when we were dead in our sins,
you sent your only Son for our deliverance.

Lifted up from the earth,
he is light and life;
exalted upon the cross,
he is truth and salvation.

Raise us up with Christ
and make us rich in good works,
that we may walk as children of light
toward the paschal feast of heaven.

We ask this through Christ, our deliverance and hope,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty God for ever and ever.

*Opening prayers, Lent 4, Year B*²

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² *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.*

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Principal Service readings

Numbers 21.4-9	Moses and the bronze serpent
Psalm 107.1-3,17-22 [or 107.1-9]	The faithful love of the Lord lasts for ever
Ephesians 2.1-10	Salvation in Christ is the free gift of God
John 3.14-21	the Son of Man must be lifted up

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The Son of Man must be lifted up

Jesus said to Nicodemus: ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶For 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.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.¹

John 3.14-21 NRSV¹

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Comments and Questions

There is quite a long encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus recorded by John – we have heard part of it today. The conversation progresses from an individual level (3.1-10) to the collective level, when Jesus says: ‘We speak about what we know ...’ (John 3.12). Jesus then tells Nicodemus how the revelation is to take place. He says that, like the example of Moses who erected a bronze serpent in the desert, to stop the people being bitten by snakes, so the Son of Man will be lifted up. In the Israelites on their exodus journey in the desert, the people =, suffering in their sinfulness, were told to look up at the serpent to be restored to health (Numbers 21.8-9), so eternal life will come to those who gaze on the Son of Man when he is elevated (3.15). Jesus has already told Nicodemus that he has spoken about earthly things and then about heavenly things (3.12). He uses words with a double meaning, like ‘elevated’ or ‘raised up’ (*hypsothenai*) to convey this. He is saying, indirectly, how he is to die, and the meaning of this for others. The high point of the revelation of God through Jesus will be when he exalted or raised up on the cross. Believing in Jesus then will bring eternal life to the believer.

Jesus then embarks on another major theme in John, that of salvation. The saving love of God lies behind the ‘lifting up’ of the Son of Man, sent to bring the possibility of salvation and eternal life to the world. Jesus tells of the immensity of God’s gift, that the world is not to be judged, that is, condemned, but saved (3.16). Human salvation rests on the acceptance or rejection of belief that the unique revelation of God comes through the Son.

Returning to the image of light and darkness, as in 1.5 – ‘the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness didn’t overcome it’ – Jesus says that the doing of evil results from loving the darkness and choosing it, hiding one’s ambiguity in it (3.20), just as a life of good deeds leads one into the light. For those who come into the light it becomes clear that their good deeds have been done in God (3.21).

The world that Jesus and Nicodemus were born into had a lot to do with being born onto the right family – being a child of Abraham. Now, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which an ordinary birth is not

enough. You need to be born all over again, ‘from above’. This new birth is not hereditary, but comes from belief.

Quotations

1

If man had his way, the plan of redemption would be an endless and bloody conflict. In reality, salvation was bought not by Jesus’ fist, but by his nail-pierced hands; not by muscle but by love; not by vengeance but by forgiveness; not by force but by sacrifice. Jesus Christ our Lord surrendered in order that he might win; he destroyed his enemies by dying for them and conquered death by allowing death to conquer him.

Preparing for Jesus’ return: daily live the blessed hope / A.W. Tozer. 2012 (1897–1963)

2

We sinned for no reason but an incomprehensible lack of love, and He saved us for no reason but an incomprehensible excess of love.

Jesus-Shock / Peter Kreeft. 2008

3

Even if no salvation should come, I want to be worthy of it at every moment.

Franz Kafka, 1883–1924

4

the work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings, not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does through us, not merely what God does in and for us.

N.T. Wright, 1948–

Related topics

For further study:

Cross; love of God; paschal mystery; faith; conversion; discipleship; sin; grace; social justice; salvation; Christology; symbol of light; reconciliation; baptism; soteriology