

God's Richness in Mercy Fourth Sunday of Lent/B March 15, 2015 5:00 PM Vigil
2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23; **Eph 2:4-10**; **Jn 3:14-21** (God is nothing but love, not only unwilling to control us or deprive us of our freedom, but suffering the consequences himself of our sin, and encouraging us to conversion.)

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all those who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

It is true our faith is based on the events we remember of the death and resurrection of Christ, but his teachings are not superfluous, although many people more or less ignore them. **Jesus had something to say about who God is or what God is like, and it's very different from what most people think** and, therefore, challenges the way most people think. Let's look at our own thoughts. Many people believe that God is the one who controls everything that happens. Is that your thought? Many people think of God like a parent, only much more powerful. Does that resonate with the way you have grown up? A lot of what people actually say offhandedly reflects these kinds of ideas, whether they are aware of it or not. For example **believers pray that events will turn out in their favor, as if God controls events.** Unbelievers scoff at the poor way God has arranged things in the world, permitting evil for example, or allowing the just to suffer, again implying that it is God's choice, this is the way God wills things.

This is not what Jesus taught; this does not fit into what he taught. For Jesus, God is not “the man upstairs.” For Jesus, God is not “the boss,” and God is not “the powers that be.” In fact **he is very aware of his own divinity and his close connection to the Father.** And yet in a way, this could be misinterpreted, but in a way **he also knows himself to be helpless.** It all fits into a basic higher schema, but he is not in charge.

Now these very **ideas that God is in control, that God is the one who decides how things turn out on earth, these ideas actually poison many people's relationship with God.** In some cases these ideas destroy altogether a person's relationship with God. **When Jesus spoke about God the Father, he was very careful of what he said.** For example in the ancient patriarchal society it was very common to refer to God as Father or King or Ruler or Judge. But Jesus was very careful. Even the word “Father” he modified. When he taught his disciples to pray, he replaced it with the word Abba, meaning really Daddy. That's what he taught his disciples. **“When you pray you say, ‘Our Daddy in heaven.’”** And you know very well that isn't the way that you learned it or I learned it. Why? Because it doesn't really suit people to be so intimate with God, even though that was Jesus' whole point. **People really want God at a distance, even if God doesn't want to be at a distance.** This is part of our human situation, **a situation which, by the way, God accepts totally.**

But if we think of God as controlling, we will never understand what St. Paul is talking about in the second reading today, the Letter to the Ephesians. **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ.”** This reference to the richness of God's mercy—what is that all about? Well, yes, there are consequences to human actions in the physical world, in the moral world. Almost all religions agree and many philosophies agree every action creates a

reaction. As in the physical world, in the moral world there are consequences. **The point is not that God removes the consequences of our actions.** No, they are all part of the way things are, but God does not leave it at that. **God allows us a second chance or a third chance. God allows us to look at our lives and their consequences, and to choose another way. This is his richness in mercy** St. Paul is talking about. As far as I know, this is unique to Christ. Buddhism and Hinduism talk about karma; that is the consequence of moral choice. They don't talk about a second chance or a third chance, not exactly.

Not only that, but **God gently persuades us to observe our lives and to make the necessary changes**, to alter those actions and those choices and those habits that produce bad fruit, that ruin relationships, that cause unnecessary hardships, **all the while respecting our freedom.** God respects our freedom. This is why God is not controlling because he respects our freedom. **He made the universe and put it in our hands.** In the Book of Genesis it's called dominion over the earth. **It is humanity that has dominion over the earth, not God.**

Further, and this is what the gospel is getting at in today's reading, **God has entered our world to be one with us, accepting in his own body and mind the consequences of our ill-considered choices**, precisely to show us how bad they are! We see it in him, in his fate. **On the Cross we see what human freedom has done.** And God gives us the Cross so that we can see what's wrong and want to change it—and we can! And this shows us that **God is nothing but love, not only unwilling to control us or deprive us of our freedom, but suffering the consequences himself of our sin, and encouraging us to conversion**, to a change of heart. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that anyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

We can see in his sufferings a reflection of the world that we have created with our freedom. If we rightly don't like what we see, **God gives a chance to repent and to make the world anew through his life-giving Spirit.** But make no mistake about it, this is a great work, not a minor alteration. And it won't be finished in our lifetimes. No one living now will see the kingdom of God really rooted on earth, but it will happen. For those who believe in him, who cannot be happy with the status quo in the world, there will be no condemnation because of their belief in him, because of his love for them. **All are free to accept God's will and cooperate in building a new world, but we know very well many don't.** Many people simply don't want God's will. Many people reject God's call. Many people do not want to cooperate with God and work for the common good or for the kingdom of God. **We have to accept that; that's the way freedom is. God has accepted it; we have to accept it.**

Now those who do accept the love of God cannot overcome those who don't. That is the dilemma, if you want to call it that, that God himself faces. We face it with him. But here in this text, **Christ is assuring us that ultimately those who believe in him will share eternal life with him, no matter how the world turns out.** Meanwhile, each of us can do something, maybe very little, but something to spread the goodness of God to others. And every little bit really helps.