

The Fourth Sunday of Lent – March 10-11, 2018

The last Sunday or two the readings and homily have been about God's laws and rules and about conscience, etc.

I tried to put out through the Scriptures how all these rules are truly a gift of God to guide us to a fuller and holier life and to our goal of life forever with God in the life to come.

Truly, if we listen carefully to our conscience we will always hear God speaking to us and guiding us.

However, one objection that comes up from people is that all of these rules are just too much of a burden, and, since we cannot keep all of these rules perfectly, how will we get to heaven?

St Paul answers that question in today's 2nd reading – "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast."

Our forgiveness and our ability to live a new life in God is something we need to give our assent to in faith and cooperate with but it is God through the gift of the Holy Spirit to us in Baptism and Confirmation who gives us the knowledge and ability to do God's will and become holy.

God does not ask anything of us that he does not give us the grace and help to do.

However, a second objection comes up is that these rules and guidelines that God give us and that the Church teaches just cause us to always feel guilty and bad in the sight of God. Because of this, some then say that if we are just going to feel this heavy burden of guilt all the time, we don't want anything to do with any religion like that. And many have left the Catholic Church or Christianity because of that.

In all honesty, sometimes we preachers are guilty ourselves of leaving people with feelings of guilt and not helping people understand the helpful role of healthy guilt in guiding us.

Today's readings address this issue by telling us that though we may experience feelings of guilt within our conscience to warn us about dangers to or relationship to God and to others, this guilt is not a punishment but a blessing from God.

Feelings of guilt call our attention to actions or ways of thinking that need change in order for us to have fuller relationship with God or with others and to take better care of our selves.

But if we choose not to heed these warnings, then it is our responsibility when bad things happen.

In the first reading we heard these words: "But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the Lord against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy."

When we ignore the voice of our conscience or feelings of guilt or the warnings of God – not only do good things that God wants for us not happen, but often bad things happen as well.

Again from the first reading: "Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects."

However, today's readings remind us also that even when we struggle to obey God's will and commandments, God never stops loving us and calling us and forgiving us if we turn back to him.

In the first reading, after years of exile in Babylon, God moved the pagan King of Persia (Cyrus) to let Israel go back home to Israel and rebuild the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus says to Nicodemus: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Yes, others and we ourselves do struggle with understanding and keeping some of God’s laws and sometimes turn away from God, but God waits for us to open ourselves to God’s ways and to turn back to Him.

One area that people struggle with is the whole issue of human sexuality – and in particular these days with specific issue of contraception or artificial birth control.

The author, Christopher West, well known for his writings on the Theology of the Body first left the Church because of this teaching and then came back to the Church also because of this teaching because he finally came to see the deep beauty and truth of human sexuality through the writing of Pope St. John Paul II on the Theology of the Body. Christopher West’s writings and explanations of the Theology of the Body are amazing and wonderful, and I leave it to you to check them out.

The truth is that God’s ways are sometimes difficult. We called as someone said – “not to fit in, with the ways of the world, but to stand out as lights shining forth the wisdom of God’s ways.

It is easy to fit in – it is not easy to stand out.

One reason that we have the disciplines of Lent and the call to penitence throughout the year is so that we keep ourselves open to taking up the cross of Jesus’ way and following him through death to our selves to resurrection and new life.

Having the cross and discipline and conscience and guilt to guide us helps each and every day.

In sports we know that we can never become better in our sport without the sacrifice of work and practice. Even then, we don’t necessarily win every time, but we become better athletes

and better persons from the discipline we learned in sports.

In the way of Jesus, dying and dying to self leads to resurrection and new life.

Many of you know Fr. Don Braukmann who served the parishes of Greenbush and Warroad and has written columns in the diocesan paper for year. He now has been diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease. It is so uplifting to read his comment in regard to dealing with his illness. He is always saying that we should not worry because everything will all lead to victory and glory with God.

Guilt is not pleasant but it is one of God's ways of pointing out things that keeping us from growing in holiness and sanctity.

This does not mean that God expects all the same things from every person. Each of us is unique, and God speaks in our consciences calls each of us in different ways and according to the circumstances of our life. We should never judge or compare ourselves to others, but keep our ears and hearts tuned to what God may be saying to us. God's ways are unique and personal in so many ways for each person.

Without changing rules, Pope Francis constantly urges priests to be more pastoral in dealing with persons and their struggles with moral issues in their life.

May God help us all to appreciate his love and direction in our life as our consciences and certain feelings of guilt continue to guide us to holiness and closer union with Christ's death and life of service leading to resurrection and new life.

May our experience of the sacrament of confession this weekend or another time can help us this Lent to face and make changes that bring us closer to God and to each other.