

4th Sunday of Lent (B)
(2 Chronicles 36:14-16.19-23 / John 3:14-21)
11.03.2018
God of Surprises

What we heard today in our first reading is quite a challenging story. Firstly, the people of Israel are in a bad shape: their Temple has been destroyed, their identity and culture are threatened because they are living in exile in a foreign land.

And suddenly, in the midst of this dark situation comes light. Cyrus the king of Persia decides to send the people back to Jerusalem and he encourages them to rebuild the Temple. A pagan king, an enemy, is chosen by God in order to restore the people of Israel.

For his part Isaiah is not short of words in his praise of Cyrus whom he considered as the shepherd of the people, the anointed and the chosen one (44:28; 45:1.4). According to the prophet, God exalted Cyrus in righteousness, and made all his paths straight (45:13).

The people must have been puzzled by this turn of event. They must have felt a bit humiliated... who would be spontaneously happy to be helped by somebody he or she does not like? Help is good but it leaves a strange feeling in our hearts when it comes from somebody we hate or despise.

So here is the great lesson of this story: God chooses who he wants to lead his people on the right path and God is a God of surprises.

This lesson is particularly appropriate for us as we prepare to celebrate the death and Resurrection of the Lord. The Pharisees and the leaders of the people of Israel forgot the lesson and were unable to welcome God's Messiah. Their main problem was that Jesus did not fit with the one they were expecting. They had a very clear idea about how the Messiah should speak and behave and they clung so much to their idea that they were not ready to welcome the one God sent to them. God surprised them and they refused the gift.

The long history of God's relationship with humanity is marked by many puzzling and challenging decisions on God's behalf: to appoint Cyrus as the liberator of his people; to make Paul the apostle to the nations; and most of all to reveal oneself in the humility and vulnerability of Jesus. The list could go on until our own days...

God is still today the God of surprises and he continues to choose men and women as messengers, prophets or leaders for the service of his people according to his criteria – not ours.

There are self-appointed prophets and leaders, men and women who think that because they are vocally liberal or conservative, hyper controversial or hyper traditionalist they can claim to be sent by God. We have to be careful.

However when somebody comes to us and challenges our ways of thinking or does not fit with our expectations, we should always take the time to discern whether this person is Spirit led or not.

The reality about God is that he is always greater and broader than all we can think or imagine. So when he speaks or reveals himself to us, he always challenges our narrow and small image we have of him.

This Lenten season is a time when we are supposed to train our hearts and minds, to stretch them a bit so that they may be ready to welcome the revelation of a love that they cannot fathom or contain.

At Easter this love will reveal itself in a way that nobody could have predicted. The prophets of old spoke of a suffering servant, yet none of them could have foretold the mystery we are going to celebrate during the Easter Triduum.

So Lent is the time to allow the Spirit to awaken anew in us the ability and the desire to be surprised by God. This is a healthy spiritual disposition which we should cultivate all lifelong.

We are all tempted to settle in a routine which makes us feel secure and in control. Because we do not like to be challenged, we can fall into the trap of listening only to those who agree with us. We can end up reading only newspapers and books which comfort our own opinions. We may choose to move in circles of people who vote and worship like us. This does not leave a lot of room for a God of surprises. This is not the best environment for growth and abundance of life.

We should not forget the pagan king Cyrus who died as a pagan and yet was for a time, by God's grace, a servant of the Lord. He is a reminder that God is free to choose whom he wants in order to accomplish his will.

He may choose somebody around us, close to us, from a different denomination or religion or race or political affiliation in order to remind us of an essential truth about him and about our faith.

Let us not give the impression that we know everything about God, that we do not need to grow in love and knowledge of him, that we are self-sufficient and unchallengeable. This is not true, this is a sure recipe for mere survival and stagnation in mediocrity.

God wants to surprise us over and over again so that we may grow in maturity to the full stature of Christ (cf. Eph 4:13). He also wants us to surprise him by opening ourselves without fear to his love.