

10th March 2021 – New Life Through Grace – Wednesday Prayer Meeting

We must remember what we are doing in these days. We are taking the readings from every Sunday in Lent and preparing our hearts for the great feast of Easter and Holy Week. Every week the Church invites us to a theme. The week before last it was the theme of the Power of Sacrifice. Last week the theme was the Divine Law and the Divine Temple. Before I go to this week I'll tell you the title: New Life Through Grace. Before we come to the theme we reflect on what we did last week- the Divine Law and the Divine Temple. We saw, in the Divine Law, God tells people how to live. These are things you should be doing, these are things you should not be doing. For many of us the law of God is a pain. Don't do this, don't do that, don't do this, don't do that, thou shall not, thou shall not, thou shall not. Ultimately everything is in knots. That's why a lot of people don't like religion - all not.

I remember I met some of my relations to give some invitations before my eldest son got married and one of my cousins who used to have a good (or a not too good) time as my roommate was telling me, "What is wrong with you? What happened to you? You were fine those days." What do you mean by fine those days? Wild, doing whatever we liked. He is saying, "You lost all the fun." It's typical of the human situation. What he is saying is, if you follow divine law you have to give up enjoyment, fun, happiness, fulfillment, excitement. All that you'll have to give up -- not, not, not and not.

But I explained to you last week, the problem is not with the law but the problem is within our hearts. Because of our sinfulness, the law God has given us to enjoy life, to have freedom, to have peace, we see it as a massive problem. I told you last week about a country which is run without laws. Everyone who wants to be lawless can go to that country and they can live there. There are no commandments. In that country, thou shall not kill no longer applies. You can kill anybody and you will not be held responsible. Would you like to live in that country? No, because you can't. Then thou shall not steal doesn't apply in that country. So you can steal anything you like. It's circulating on the internet these days that people are breaking chains. Chains are broken, people are attacked. Supposing they are not held responsible, can you imagine what is going to take place? Thou shall not covet your neighbour's goods. Somebody walks along and sees your TV is bigger than his or her TV and they walk in and say, "Please excuse me I want your TV," and they take it and go home. We want the law for other people. We don't want the law for our own selves. We want the law for others because of our sinfulness.

When you fall and you are hurting and your life is disturbed and you know you have made a terrible mistake, we have something called the temple. The temple is returning to God. I made a mistake, I'm sorry, I messed it up. We come to the temple of God, the presence of God. When you come there He will restore us. The word of God or the divine law tells us the mind of God and how to live it, but if you fail we have the temple of God and in the temple of God, we have the presence of God waiting to heal us, restore us, transform us. That's the beautiful revelation of last week.

In the New Testament we see a beautiful thing -- that the divine law and the divine temple have come together in a person. Who is that person? Jesus Christ. The divine law and the divine temple have come together. How do you know the divine law has come? Because He is the word of God, logos. When Jesus speaks it is the divine law. It is a revelation of His law. That's why he revealed the mind and heart of God when he forgave the woman caught in adultery, but chased away the money changers. He turned the human law upside down. Divine law. He is not only the divine law but he is also the temple of God. In other words you have come to him, you have an opportunity to have a direct encounter with God. You can meet him. You must never forget that. Christianity is not a religion per se. Then what is it? It is a living

encounter with a living person. Who is that? Jesus Christ. He is alive and that's why we have a great hope, whatever it may be. So here is Jesus the Divine Law and he is also the divine temple. You come to Him, He will tell you what is right and wrong, He will tell you the answers that God has for you but He just won't let you be. He will also give you His presence that you may live the joy, the peace, the love that He brings into your life. The great good news we saw last week.

Now we are going into the fourth week of Lent and the Church invites us to focus on the theme of grace. New Life Through Grace. You must remember Christianity is not just a mere religion. In most religions, instructions are given on how to live. Buddhism is a philosophy and tells you how to live, on what to do and what not to do, Islam gives instructions from God but Christianity is more than a religion, it is a revelation of something called grace. To look at this beautiful theme of grace, we go to the first reading. Before I give you the first reading it want to give you four directions or ways we move into God:

1. We fall - I don't think there is any human being who has not fallen. When we fall, the second one happens as a result of the fall:

2. We burn - internally we lose our peace, we go through a lot of internal struggles and we have a lot of internal issues in life. We burn. So you don't have to tell people to go to hell because the moment you fall, you fall into hell. That's why some people can't sleep. Taking a sleeping tablet is a shortcut but it won't solve your problem, you have to put your life right with God. Some people can't get out of anxiety, can't get out of tension, can't get out of fear because they are living in a fallen state. Imagine children being born to people who only know the fallen state. That's the new generations. So they don't know it but they are having depression, they don't know it but they are sad, they don't know it but they are addicted because they have been born into a fallen state and they are burning from their childhood. So you fall and then you burn. Then if you are lucky enough you'll know the third one:

3. We return - to whom do you return? You return to God. You have to return to Him. The laws of God are immovable. I told you how Cecil DeMille, the director of the movie The Ten Commandments said it beautifully. He said, "You don't break the commandments, the commandments break you." If your life is shattered, the only way you can put it back together is through God. God can, if you fall, burn and return. Then you have the fourth one which is the result and the blessing:

4. Miracle - that is where grace comes in to our lives. When you return you have a miracle from God and we also call it the gift of grace.

So we are going to follow these four steps that go on a journey with God: Fall, burn, return, miracle and with that miracle, grace. So let's look at it in the first reading. You can see all four beautifully given to us in 2 Chronicles 36:14. This was in 500 BC and the chronicler is explaining the situation in Jerusalem:

2 Chronicles 36:14

Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the Lord which He had consecrated in Jerusalem.

The people associated with people who didn't believe in God. So little by little, their lifestyle, the lifestyle of people who didn't believe in God, their value system, their way of living became influential enough to

impact the believers and the priests in the temple. Little by little they didn't follow the laws of God but they followed what other people are doing. If everyone is bribing what can I do? I also have to give a bribe. Whose law are you following? The law of the world. In Sri Lanka you can't get anything done. In the corruption index we have a unique position but I don't think the intensity of religion is more than in our country. If you put the radio or TV on how many channels are talking religion. Early morning there are the religious thoughts. Politicians are visiting temples, churches, kovils, everyone saying prayers, carrying things on their head but the lifestyle is sinful. It looks like it's not a modern problem but it was an ancient problem. People say, "How can you live like that today? You have to live in the way other people are living." They forgot the ways of God. See what happened:

2 Chronicles 36:15

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through His messengers again and again, because He had pity on His people and on His dwelling place.

He raised prophets and God sent them prophets. The argument is very simple. The prophets come and remind the people they have gone away from God and the people return to God and everything is fine. That's how it should have been. But see what happens:

2 Chronicles 36:16

But they mocked God's messengers, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against His people and there was no remedy.

They mocked God's prophets, they attacked those God sent. Why? Because when you are doing something wrong and someone points it out to you and you are not willing to change that, we get damn wild. We've been in this work for many years so we meet people where suddenly the wife has discovered the husband is having an extra marital relationship. Those are the ways of the world. The wife accuses the husband and says, "You are having an affair!" Does the husband say, "Yes, I'm very sorry I've been having an affair,"? What does he do? He denies but does he deny by saying, "Sorry darling, I'm not having an affair."? How does he deny? "How dare you accuse me?" Dash things on the floor, kick the table, smash the TV, shout at people. "How dare you think that I'm doing something?" Then only you realise what he is doing. It's called a cover-up.

That's what they did. When the conscience was pricked they did a cover-up but that doesn't take away natural law, that doesn't take away the repercussions of what we do. It comes back to us. 2 Chronicles 36:19 explains what happened. The Babylonians came to Jerusalem and see what happened:

2 Chronicles 36:19

They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.

Can you remember the four steps I gave you? Step number one is fall, step number two is burn. You have the word burn here. That's exactly what happened. Their city was destroyed, their temple was destroyed, their palaces were destroyed because when you disobey God, sooner or later we burn. No nation, no people, no individual can escape that. If you look at the empires of the world and world history, you will see this principle working over and over again through nations, through empires. First you stand up, then you fall into human self indulgence and then you burn.

2 Chronicles 36:20

He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power.

What happened to them after that? They became servants, slaves. They lost it all. First you fall, then you burn and then the third one will happen, you return to God. It is in pain that most people start praying. It is in pain that most people will seek God. It is not when they are happiest. When they are happiest God is the least thought in our mind, when we are prosperous God is the least thought. But in our pain He becomes the first thought.

It's beautifully given in the psalm of next Sunday, psalm 137. Unfortunately everyone knows psalm 137 for the wrong reason -- they know it because of Boney M. Boney M sang psalm 137. It's such a sad psalm but they sang it as if they've got serious ants in their pants. Imagine people also dancing to that. Here is the saddest moment in the Jewish history, explained through psalm 137 but people are rocking and dancing and gyrating and it typifies what has happened to us. We don't even listen to the words we dance to.

Psalm 137:1

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

This is written by the exiles. They were taken from Jerusalem. They remembered God and began to think about God. "My God we were unfaithful. That's why we are suffering this thing in our life."

Psalm 137:2

There on the poplars we hung our harps...

They had these harps they played on the temple. They hung them up, no more music.

Psalm 137:3

...for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

The irony is the most popular song has come from this, the sadness, the grieving of these people. That's exactly what they wanted. They said, "Sing the songs of joy!"

Psalm 137:4

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

They were repenting and returning to God. It's eternal. These truths are eternal and won't change until the end of time. You fall, you burn, you return.

Psalm 137:5-6

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

These verses have an amazing history. You know that in the Second World War, Hitler and the leaders of the German Nazi leadership chose to kill and destroy the Jews. Actually they managed to kill 6 million Jews. 6 million is one fourth of our population. It's very interesting to find out how Germany that has produced the best classical music - the best classical composers of the world are German; the best bible scholars - the scholars who have analysed the scripture the deepest, the world-famous Bultmann who studied the gospel of John and revealed modern techniques of bible analysis, who is brilliantly known all over the scripture world, comes from Germany. But this amazing brutality also comes from Germany. It's very interesting to ask the question: why did a Christian nation massacre 6 million Jews?

To know the answer you have to go to the 15th century. Martin Luther who was a priest of the Catholic Church separated from the Church because of the sinfulness and the conflicts happening at that time. There were a lot of issues in the Church. There was something called simony, which is buying positions in the church with your wealth and power. Then they sold indulgences where people were told that if you buy enough indulgences you can send your dead loved ones to heaven. There was a lot of corruption and Luther stood against it and there was a major conflict in the church. The result of that conflict was Luther left the church and formed what we now call the Protestant tradition. The Protestants are, as the word goes, protesting this. Luther, when he started the Protestant movement, had a great love for the Jews and said, "We must understand them, we have to love them," and then he gave them the gospel but the Jews being Jews did not accept the gospel.

What happened? Luther became very angry and Luther is a German. Luther said, "These are the ones who killed Christ, they will never accept the gospel. They need to be destroyed." He said it 500 years before and this mindset travelled down through the centuries and they called the Jews the killers of Jesus Christ. They never thought that Jesus himself is a Jew. They had this heart. They had fallen into this and they destroyed them.

Why I'm explaining this is, what happened was, when they were being taken to be killed and they knew they were going to be executed, most of them read and quoted Psalm 137. "If I forget thee O Jerusalem let my right hand be cut off." That's how they died. In other words they held to their faith. They had fallen, they were burning but they were returning to God.

I think we need to understand this beautiful truth. When that happened, when these three things happened, when you fall, when you burn, when you return, you have the fourth one which is called a miracle or God's grace. With God's grace, God turns this curse into a blessing. That's the good news of Christianity. Any situation you have fallen into is not the end but only the beginning if you return to God. It's only the beginning of the greater blessing, the greater grace, the deeper gift God is offering us.

It is shown in the reading here. If you go back to the reading and go to 2 Chronicles 36:22, verse 22 jumps 70 years forward.

2 Chronicles 36:22

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and put it into writing...

Persia is modern Iran and Babylon is modern Iraq. Iraq and Iran have been fighting for thousands of years. When one is strong it destroys the other. The unfortunate thing is when they marched on each other, they

marched through the Holy Land and one or the other crushed the people there. Here the king of Persia became stronger than the king of Babylon, he waged war on him and now he destroyed the power of the Babylonians. The Bible says God was moving in his heart. That's why in the political-social dimension God is moving. We can't escape that, we have to recognise His movement, recognise His voice and speak it to the people. It's not just political analysis because anyone can do that. It's the voice of God moving through the events that happen around us. If we don't do that, God's voice is not heard anymore.

2 Chronicles 36:23

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you -- may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up."

They were asked to return to Jerusalem. The miracle of grace happened. They returned. Actually the kingdom of Israel was taken into exile in 700 BC but they never returned in 200 years. These people, 70 years and they were returning because you fall, you burn, you return and you get a miracle of grace. That's the invitation the Lord has for us tonight. In Lent we have been given this invitation. Have you fallen? Are you burning? Then return. For God's gift of grace is waiting to do something in your life.

This miracle happened in the 20th century as well because Israel or the Jews were without a nation for 2000 years. Wherever they went they were persecuted, whether it's in Poland, whether it's in Central Europe, whether it's in France. Wherever they went they were persecuted but they held to God. In an amazing turn of events in 1945 when the war ended, suddenly the world realised that Hitler had destroyed 6 million Jews. The world was disturbed and the superpowers in the UN - each superpower has veto power. If they say no you can't do anything. America has one, England has one, France has one, China has one, Russia has one. If you want to get something creative and new into the world, all 5 must agree. Those days, for those 5 to agree was a miracle in itself because they didn't agree on anything. But they agreed on the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. 2000 years after the exile, the state of Israel was reborn. The same thing that happened took place there because God can restore. That's the promise of the end times. God can and will restore. This is good news. You can be fallen, you can be burning, but that's not your end because if you return to God, a miracle of grace is waiting. Isn't that good news people must know? There is no place where you can fall to from which He cannot pick you up and take you. The gospel tells us even from death itself. That's the power of the gospel this week. You can see it beautifully in the gospel of John.

The gospel is John 3:14-21. Though it is from verse 14-21 I'm going to take the bottom verses first and then explain the first verse:

John 3:19

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

The Old Testament is repeated here. We don't want to give up our addiction, we don't want to give up our illicit relationship, we don't want to give up our cheating, we don't want to give up our sinful ways so we hide from God. I remember when we were children the church was filled with ladies and most of the men were outside because they are hiding from God. Why are we hiding? Because we know that some of the stuff we are doing is no good. So you don't want the light and you hide from God.

John 3:20

Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

The distaste for prayer is a deep spiritual problem. Why is that? Because our flesh and our nature doesn't want to be exposed to the light of God. Why? Because we don't want to let go what we hold on to. The Bible says we are blind and we are deaf. We can't see that God has better answers. So we think the joy we get from partying is the ultimate joy. So we don't want to give up partying and obey God. Therefore we hide from God because we want to protect the partying. Or we think the pleasure we get from an illicit sexual relationship is the highest form of happiness. So we don't want to come to God because God will ask me to give that up. We don't realise that the happiness of a sexual relationship is a sad shadow of the true joy that comes from the heart of God.

Because we live in darkness we don't see it that way! We see everything of God as a wet blanket. Again we have to be religious? Why do we have to do this? Can't we put on Netflix and watch a show? The Bible says it's a problem of our human condition, that darkness is light and light is seen as darkness.

John 3:21

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

Coming to God is coming to the light, coming to Jesus. We fall, we burn, we return to Jesus in the New Testament and the reading today says look at him. Looking at Jesus is the pathway to grace and glory:

John 3:14

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.

I want to remind you of the snake in the desert. The Israelites were wild slaves. That's why God took them through the desert for 40 years -- because they had to be transformed into the people of God. That's what you mean by a spiritual journey. It takes years to move from the wild nature inside to a docile, submitted, beautiful life of grace. It's an inner journey. We distract ourselves by doing a lot of stuff outside without dealing with the inner journey inside. Here what happened was, they were not satisfied. They complained about this and they compliment about that and they complained about others. It's like taking people on tour to Holy Land. People complain the water is not right, this is not right, we are waking up too early, we are doing this. We are having enough issues. Why? Because people are never satisfied.

So they were given manna and they said, "Everyday we are having manna, we want something else, change the menu for God's sake!" And then God gave them quail. I never knew what quail is until they served it in Chalakkudy. It's such a small bird! God gave quail and they said, "We are sick of this quail!" Then only God got really upset and said, "I can't fix these people. Send them snakes."

What did they do? They returned. They said, "My God please forgive us. We did something wrong." They were not repentant actually, they were dying. Then only God told Moses, "Take a stick, put it up and make a bronze snake. Everyone who looks on that snake will be healed." Today it's the sign of medicine, it's the snake on the staff.

Now the word of God says look at Jesus like people looked at the snake. Where do you look at him? Look at Jesus crucified.

John 3:15

...that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Look at him and believe in him. The New Testament isn't telling us, "Look at Jesus the infant in Bethlehem." That's the Jesus most people look at because at Christmas only people look at Christ. Where is Christ? In a manger. Baby Christ. Or people look at the resurrected Christ, the glorified Christ. Or people look at the miracle working Christ, the water walking Christ, the healing Christ, the feeding Christ, but the Bible is asking us to look at the crucified Christ. If you want to be healed, saved, miracle of grace you have to look at the crucified Christ.

Tonight I want to share with you if I can and the Lord permits me, the insight of what we will see as we look at the crucified Christ. What will we see? Actually Jesus was assailed by the world. People would have told him: Become famous, become powerful, become glorious, but when you look at the face of Christ on the cross, you see the true heart of God. They say if you want to see the face of God, look at Christ on the cross. I want to show you 4 or 5 things we can see on that cross:

1. Jesus was loved enough by God the Father to be rejected by the whole world. It's an amazing truth. Here is a man who is not depending on any person's love. He is powerful. Why is He powerful? He is loved so deeply by God that he is saying, even if the whole world rejects me it won't stop me. That's real power. It takes a long time to understand that, that this capacity to experience rejection from the whole world is power. How much we cry -- this one doesn't understand me, that one doesn't understand me, no one is loving me, no one to talk to me, no one to tell me how valuable I am. For God's sake grow up! Look at Christ. Look at Him. Where do you see Him? On the cross. What do you see? He was loved enough to be rejected by the whole world. That's power, that's real power. It takes a lifetime to understand that that's power. It looks like lunacy. You're rejected by the whole world we everyone doesn't want you but still you have value because you're loved by God.

2. Jesus was rich enough to become poor - the Father said, "Son I love you, that's enough for you." He said, "Yes Father, I'll do your will," but he ends up on a cross. Everyone shouts at him, everyone rejects him but he is free because the love of the Father is enough for him. That's freedom. Look at him on the cross. The Father says, "Son, I am your Father, I am the owner of the universe." He says, "Yes Father, I trust your wealth." He was enough to even give up the shred of clothing he wore. That shows the true wealth does not belong to this world. How blind we are. We think true wealth is here and we are collecting to leave it all and go. "O God a heart attack?! Wait wait! I haven't spent my money yet! I've only collected it! I didn't have time to enjoy it!" Jesus said, "You fool. Tonight he will want your life." He was rich enough to be poor. Looking at the face of Jesus on the cross.

3. Jesus was strong enough to be weak and vulnerable - he allowed himself to be handled by people because he was secure and strong in God. He said no, this is not reality. People said ruling the people here on this earth is reality and strength but he said no. This power passes away. They said we will show it to you and attacked him, manhandled him, carried him, crucified him but he said I will not accept that. Real power is in God. Look at the cross of Christ. He became powerless in the eyes of others because he trusted in the Father. The blindness of humanity is being shattered by the cross of Jesus Christ. He refuses to give

into our world's dimensions, he refuses to be ruled by the standards of this world. The powerful ones came, the rich ones came but he refused to accept it. Here he hangs on the cross.

4. Jesus was convinced enough to die for what he believed - the whole world against him, you are alone and you have nothing but look at the cross. Convinced enough to die for what he believed. Then you begin to realise here is the light shining to humanity. Human love will never meet your need, human power will never fulfill you. You will leave it at death and even before death you will be unsatisfied, you will be broken because your destiny is beyond this world. That's the cross. Your fulfilment is beyond this world. That's the cross. Convinced enough to die.

5. Jesus was loving enough to forgive the whole world - look at the face of Jesus Christ.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God so loved the world that He gave His only son. The question I asked 3 weeks ago is: Who loves you the most? Myself. But you can't die for yourself. Try and see, squeeze your own neck and you can't because you can't die for yourself. You can kill someone for yourself but you can't die for yourself. But here is someone who gave up his life for you. When you look at the cross you find the person who loves you more than you can love yourself. When you look at Him you begin to realise there is something greater than human power, there is something greater than human honour, there is something greater than human acceptance.

As I prayed this I began to realize the Lord seems to be telling me, to know Him is to do His will and if you are rejected by the whole world you are still not alone. Why is that? He is there for you. If you become vulnerable and come under attack, you're still strong. Why? Because the one who has died for you and has risen from the dead has come back to be with you. If you have to face persecution and rejection as you say yes to His plan, you will never be abandoned because the one who died for you has come back for you and now shares His presence with you. That's the Eucharist, the living presence come back so that darkness will be turned to light, so that we will see things in a completely different way.

In this time of Lent, in the fourth week, I'm inviting you, if you have fallen, like all of us, if you are burning, recognize that. Are you lovely? Are you sad? That means you're burning. Do you feel unloved? That means you're burning. Do you feel your life is valueless? That means you're burning. Don't try to kill someone else for it and say, "You're not loving me enough, you're not caring for me enough, you're not giving me enough attention." Don't try to kill somebody for it. Without doing that you return to the Lord. Look at him. As he hangs on the cross he is taking away the darkness that covers us.

What's the darkness? The darkness of thinking that all answers are here, that human love will satisfy me, that human power will make me strong, that human glory will fulfill me -- the lie that is darkness which is our light, he will expose it and then he will say, "Let me accompany you to the right place. The whole world rejects you, I am there for you. I am your strength, I am the presence, I carry you into eternity." Then we are free to walk in His ways.

I preached this sermon yesterday and I asked him what he thought and he said, "Don't ask me now. I need to listen to this 2-3 times and sit before the blessed sacrament and then allow the Lord to tell me what it

means." It's not just an intellectual understanding of truths. It's a turning from darkness to light and when light has become darkness, we have been holding this and that's why you have to look at the cross. Lent is a time of beauty because we are invited to look at the cross.