

**Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Fourth Sunday in Lent, "Laetare Sunday," March 13-14, 2021, Cycle B**

With Laetare (Rejoice) Sunday we come to the close of the first half of Lent, and now enter that phase of Lent where we focus all of our attention and prayer on the person of Jesus. Beginning with this Sunday, and every day for the next two weeks, and into the first part of Holy Week, our Gospel passages will be from the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John focuses intensely on the person of Jesus, who alone leads us into the light of salvation and eternal life.

We spent the first part of Lent focusing on our conversation. The purpose of seeking deeper conversation is compunction; "compunction" is the root of our word "puncture." Compunction suggests we are trying to deflate our egos, disabusing ourselves of any notions that we can save ourselves, or any self-deceit that we are great disciples of Jesus. Having spent the first half of Lent in fasting, prayer and almsgiving, we hopefully come to realize in our failure to live out our Lenten disciplines perfectly – that we cannot save ourselves, and how radically we need the salvation only Jesus provides. So, we turn attention to Jesus, and away from ourselves.

We hear Jesus tell Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

Jesus had just had a conversation with Nicodemus about being born again. As John begins the tale of the encounter, we are told that Nicodemus approaches Jesus at "night." Now, for John – and the readers of John – "night" is a code word meaning that Nicodemus lives in darkness, and needs a light to dispel the darkness and guide him. John presents Jesus as the Light sent into a world of darkness by the Father.

To be able to live in the light, Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be "born from above." Nicodemus sits there scratching his head, wondering how you can be born all over again. Nicodemus of course interprets Jesus too literally. Jesus tells Nicodemus you are born again through "water and the Spirit." Again, Nicodemus just sits there scratching his head, wondering just what kind of veiled language Jesus is speaking in. What are water and the Spirit all about?

Finally, Jesus tells Nicodemus just how this New Life is brought about, and how all can participate in this new life! Jesus says to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Of course, Jesus is speaking about being lifted up on the cross. The Cross is Jesus' hour of glory, where he expresses the radiant light of divine love. Jesus' glory is his self-emptying of his life – his pouring out of his very Divine Life, that we might drink fully of that life through faith. Jesus says, "The person who believes in Him has eternal life."

Jesus means more than just making an intellectual assent that "Jesus is Lord." St. Paul says we are saved through faith. The Letter of James reminds us that even the demons believe the truth about God and "tremble." But, the demons are not saved, because they believe with their minds, but they still live in darkness. No, believing in Jesus, in the Christian sense, is something more; Jesus challenges us to believe into Him; we are to take up our cross and empty ourselves for others as Jesus did! Faith means we let Jesus live through us.

Baptism – being born through water and the Spirit –symbolizes that I believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and I now identify myself with living Jesus' life – that the way to eternal life, is through a life of self – emptying. When I realize that eternal life comes through the Cross – then I no longer live in Darkness. Jesus saves us!