

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year (B)

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by

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Homily Reflections

So often what we read or see in the news is only a symptom, it's just the surface. The reality lays hidden, and, perhaps years later, the real story may appear. Or it's like a physician, he may order a battery of tests to find out whether the source of a pain is something transitory, like a sprain, or much more serious, like a cancer eating at a vital organ.

In the readings from the Word of God today, there is no fudging the reality. We know instantly that we are dealing with a terrible spiritual malady, and that the reactions of those to whom the message is delivered is seriously off track. We read, and I quote: "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."

God then touched the heart of King Cyrus of Persia, who was given the grace to let the exiled people return to

Jerusalem, there to rebuild their temple, "the house" of God.

The second reading, from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, reminds us of a central truth of our faith, namely, the key role of faith itself in the way of salvation, and that faith itself is a "gift of God." How grateful we should be to God for this wondrous gift, underscored so powerfully in the Gospel passage which contrasts the "light" of the heavenly gift with the "darkness" of those whose "works were evil." Jesus was ready to be "lifted up" in his crucifixion so that all those who "believe in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

History repeats itself, but under various disguises. The history of God's people in exile has a marvelous echo in more recent times. There has been the discovery of the importance of religious freedom, a great gift of the Second Vatican Council, but a gift anticipated in Poland of the Fifteenth Century and, for the first time in the English-speaking world, by Maryland in the Seventeenth Century.

In 1634, King Charles I granted to Lord Baltimore the right to establish a colony in Maryland with religious

freedom guaranteed. This was to be a second such effort, the first one begun in Newfoundland in the colony of Avalon in the 1620's, having failed.

The colonists came crossing in the ships named *The Ark* and *The Dove*. Their colony had difficult days, but kept its essential health until the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, when William of Orange came to the throne of England. He soon sent a Royal Governor to Maryland, to replace the Calverts who were descendents of Lord Baltimore. King William instructed the Governor to enforce the anti-Catholic penal laws of England, which were also the laws of Maryland, and this resulted in every Catholic Church in Maryland being razed to the ground by 1700.

With the American War of Independence, the issue of religious freedom was lifted up again. It became central to the cause, so much so that, after a Constitution was enacted, the very First Amendment guaranteed religious freedom. Passage of the amendment was strongly supported by the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, and by his cousin, Bishop John Carroll, the first bishop in the United States.

In naming John Carroll to head the Diocese of Baltimore, Pope Pius VI asked him to build a cathedral. As it rose, it served Catholics in more than 35 of the present States of the Union (the original States, thirteen in number, those in the Northwest Territory, now the middle-west and those which had been part of the Louisiana Territory). Although Bardstown (later known as Louisville), Boston, New York and Philadelphia were designated dioceses in 1808, they did not receive their Episcopal leaders until 1810, when the first bishops of all but New York were ordained by Archbishop John Carroll in Baltimore. The first bishop of New York was an Irish Dominican ordained a Bishop in Rome who, however, died in Naples on his way to New York. This led Cardinal John O'Connor of New York to joke this his first predecessor was in fact the most successful bishop of New York, because he did not make a single mistake on the job.

Meanwhile the first Cathedral of our country became, in the words of Pope John Paul II, the architectural symbol worldwide of religious freedom, a modern, sacred match for the ancient Temple of Jerusalem.