

A Third Message of Lent from Bishop Peter

Greetings to All the Sisters, Brothers, and Friends of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion!

In the cover of the darkness of night Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a distinguished rabbinical scholar of Torah, secretly sought an audience with Jesus while in the ancient holy city of Jerusalem. The Gospel According to John records this clandestine conversation between the two rabbis and what unfolds is some of the most startling words ever spoken by Jesus. So staggering were the things that were said by Jesus that Nicodemus was incredulous yet at the same time he was strangely drawn to to what seemed to be a new revelation of the coming Kingdom of God in the person of this obscure teacher from Galilee.

It was during this exchange that Jesus utters the words of one of the best known and most often quoted verses of the entire Christian Bible, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Within these words of Jesus, Christians throughout the centuries have recognized the heart of the Gospel of Christ. In these words we are told that the ultimate being, God, who is the source of all reality, all forms and all particular things, is also the source of the highest and noblest dynamic in all existence, the power of love.

Love has its ultimate beginning in the hidden mystery of the Divine Life. What we glimpse of God in these words is that the Son is begotten within this hidden Life of God. We are also shown that the Son is the Beloved of God, the God who created the world and proclaimed it good; the God who formed humanity from the dust of the earth and breathed into humanity the breath of divine life so

that we would be the bearers of the image of God to the whole of creation, the "Imago Dei." This Divine creator is also the God who called forth Abraham the father of the people of Israel. This is the same God who spoke to Moses at the summit of Sinai in the midst of the holy fire and smoke of the divine glory, the Shekinah. This same God, whom the people of Israel worshiped in holy awe, is now revealed in the person of the Son, Jesus the Christ, to be a being of pure and Holy love. "God is Love." And as such this God, we are told, loves, and is loving continuously the world, the entire cosmos, the whole of the universe which is the masterpiece of the divine creator.

We learn from the Torah that the whole of creation, both spirit and matter, was declared good by her creator from the very beginning. We now learn from Jesus that this same creation is the object of the Creator's love. It is revealed that the whole of the created world along with the human race, indeed, especially because of the human race, is the beloved of God.

But in some mysterious way, for reasons we cannot fully comprehend, God's beloved creation became subject to death. The whole universe along with humanity, the divine image, became hostage to the entropy of corruption and mortality. "Death reigns." All things die, all things pass away. Everything perishes. The whole of the universe is disintegrating into oblivion.

But this simple verse of the Gospel tells us that this God could not stand by and allow this to happen. "God so loved the world..." In the depths of the divine wisdom, Hagia Sophia, God determines the unfolding plan of His eternal will, and that divine plan was determined from the very foundation of the world. God would redeem the whole of creation and He would begin His redemptive work of love within the human race.

God would send the divine Son, the eternal Word, the Beloved One, into the created world to bring the message of the Gospel to humankind. This was done so that those human beings who would believe this Gospel and put their trust in the person of the Son, the Word made flesh, would once again have eternal life and would no longer be perishing, would no longer be subject to corruption at the hands of that grim reaper called the Death, ha Thanatos.

Through this saving action of God in Christ death would be overcome. "The last enemy to be destroyed is Death." With this new life, given to us by grace and received in faith, we are now enabled to be agents of God's redeeming love in the world. We, the human race, now play an indispensable role in the salvation of the whole world. Salvation is not limited to a few human beings, but involves the entire universe. Salvation is not merely individual but it is cosmic, it is the saving act of God for the whole of His beloved creation.

As human beings who's hearts have been transformed by the divine act of God in Jesus Christ, we become co-workers in the divine act of saving the world. We are to be beings filled and transformed by God into creatures of perfect and holy love. As such we are called to love all creation and we are to love everyone into becoming loving beings as well. We are to love a hostile universe into loving. Love is infectious and we are to become the agents of this infection of divine love.

It is now through us that the redeeming love of God for the universe is brought to manifestation until that time when Christ's victory over all evil and death is fully manifested and then humanity in Christ will hand all things over to God "that God may be all in all." This is our eternal destiny.

No wonder poor Nicodemus was incredulous and at the same time was irresistibly drawn to this Gospel of which the person of Jesus

was the embodiment in the temple of his body. This is why Nicodemus was there the day the broken and dead body of Jesus was taken down from the cross. This is why Nicodemus with tears in his eyes, tenderly washed the battered and bruised body of Jesus and along with Joseph of Arimathea, carefully wrapped the lifeless body of the Son of God and laid Him in a tomb. They left the tomb after sealing it shut with no idea of what universe shaking event was to take place in just three days time, the beginning of the new creation in a way they could have never imagined.

This is the Story. This is the Gospel story that is summed up in the few simple words, "For God so loved the world..." We become a part of that larger story. The journey of Lent reminds us of that. During Lent we make our way into the ultimate Love Story, the eternal story of God's love for the world. We do this every time we act in obedience to the love of God. For whenever we perform a loving act for another, especially for those who are at the bottom of human need, we have joined our stories to the Divine Story. Whenever we perform an act of love to an animal or plant, to the earth or any aspect of creation, we are living out the mystery of God's Love Story in the midst of our own personal story. That is what full redemption is all about.

With Love,

+Peter