

Let me set the stage for you in this 1st reading. This takes place long after God has freed the Israelites from Egypt through Moses, in fact 887 years later. This takes place long after Israel had become a kingdom, in fact, 436 years after King David. The Israelites are in a dire moral situation: infidelity after infidelity, idolatry after idolatry, sin after sin. And I want to point out something very telling about God. The reading doesn't say that God sent down fire on His people and destroyed them all. Let me read it: "He had compassion on His people and His dwelling place... Early and often did the Lord, the God of their Fathers send messengers to them." So the first act of mercy for God was to send prophets to them, to show them their sins, to point out that they were being unfaithful.

Now let me ask you a question: when someone points out a fault to us, what many times is our reaction? A lot of times: we feel judged, even condemned and we get our bristles up, puffed up in pride... "stop judging me." And we even do this with God when our conscience pricks us about our sin. We rationalize our sin or complain that we can do what we want. But what pride doesn't see is that this prickling of conscience is a mercy. It is even a mercy when someone else points out our sin, if that is done in a justified and charitable way. So God had great compassion on His people by showing them their sin through prophets, and God has great mercy on us when He shows us our sin through our conscience and through the words of others. We must have the humility to listen.

Let's go on in the reading and see how the Israelites reacted to this mercy from God: "But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His warnings, and scoffed at his prophets." Then what did God do? The reading tells us that they did this "until the anger of the Lord against His people was so inflamed, that there was no remedy." At this point, God didn't have any choice. He had to turn up the loud speaker, so to speak, so His people would hear; what does God allow? In the Reading, "Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces on fire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons."

Now in the eyes of the world, it might seem as if God is being very harsh and to the people themselves it might have seemed as if God had abandoned them. But what God did in allowing Israel to be captured, to go into exile was a great mercy. They would not listen, even when God pleaded with them. In fact, they scoffed at God. What would have been cruel is if God would have said "Fine, I'm done with you."

Rather in mercy He allowed the conquering and the exile so that they would come to their senses and return to God. As we skip ahead in this reading, we see that eventually – 50 years later – through a new king God mercifully restores the Israelites back to their homeland and this pagan king even builds them a new temple. God's correction in leading Israel into exile led them then into new life. We too must be humble to listen to the voice of God mercifully correcting us through the voice of conscience, through the correction of others, and sometimes even through the trials and difficulties of life. But God does not correct us to destroy us or abandon us, but only to lead us to new life.

“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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church on the 4th Sunday of Lent, 2012, Fort Wayne, Indiana.