

New Brighton, Sunday 19th March 2023

4th Sunday in Lent

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The text of the Introit which gave the nickname and title to this fourth Sunday in Lent is taken from the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 66. The prophet is calling to joy after the sufferings, because they are suspended for the time being. I would like to replace that excerpt into the full context of Isaiah's prophecies. A few chapters before, we heard about the suffering servant, in chapter 50 and 53. 700 years before they happened, this well-known page of the Bible is announcing with an amazing precision all the pains, torments and afflictions which were inflicted to Our Lord.

The book of Isaiah gave us the order of events to be followed, if we would like to be true followers of Our Lord. We cannot be united in joyful celebrations with Him, if we do not desire to also be united before, in his sufferings.

The color of this Sunday mass is giving us a lot to meditate about all this. The rose color was so-called after the queen of the flowers, the one traditionally offered to express our best feelings and love to a person. This rose is not only a beautiful color, friendly and cheerful, but is also the color and name of that flower, the most beautiful and fragrant, but which grows up upon a branch covered of thorns.

From the rose tree we're planting in our garden, firstly, we will only see branches, leaves and thorns. But after the long months of winter, when it prepared for spring and summer, quietly resting, and nicely looked after by the gardener, the rose bush flourishes several times with numerous flowers, which gives colours and joy in our garden.

You will probably notice that the older your rose tree, the more thorns it has on the main and oldest branch. And the older it gets, the stronger it is, the more thorns it is ornated with, the more beautiful its roses are.

This doesn't mean that we need to be old in age to produce the good fruits, but that all the thorns and pains we're accepting in this life are preparing us to produce the most beautiful flowers of holiness. Here the age in spiritual life doesn't equals our age since our birth. Holiness is reachable for all, according to our condition.

The only condition to be able to do so, is to accept the thorns the Lord is offering to us. But we know that our acceptance is already a part for the joy which is promised to us.

This mixed joy is exactly the feeling that seized the composer of this Mass of the fourth Sunday in Lent. The Gregorian melody of the Introit is joyful and cheerful, but also slightly stained with a bit of sadness and remembrance of the past sufferings, and those to come. The Cross is always to be received and carried before the rest in peace and joy. For this reason, today, the liturgy of today the Church is visiting the basilica of the Holy Cross, where are kept the relics of the Passion in Rome.

The Church offers us to contemplate the instruments of torture which obtained our salvation. We are grateful and joyful because Our Lord saved us from hell, but He endured the most painful and infamous death for that. And he would like us to take a part in it. St Paul gave

us the reason of such request, “filling up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in our flesh”¹

Nothing is missing in the Passion, but if we refuse to take our part in it, our personal love for God will be missing in that same Passion. Jesus remains like in agony until the end of the world. Jesus died, once for all, but He expects us to join Him in his holy sufferings with ours. This desire of Jesus should not be looked as a painful and rebuking burden we ought to drag, but as a light feather to warm our hearts: He wants us with Him. What a company! We, poor sinners, unworthy of God’s love and mercy because of our numerous failures which caused His death, are still wanted besides God, to walk behind Him, but also - what an honour! - to carry with Him the Holy Cross of our salvation, the same Cross we are venerating today, while we are placed in spirit into that roman basilica.

This desire of Jesus is expressed to us in a peculiar manner with the multiplication of the loaves, which is today’s gospel. He knows our weakness, but also our desire to follow Him. Therefore, he provided us with the spiritual strength to carry on our journey in His holy company. I cannot express in better words than our Patron Saint, St Francis de Sales, this delicacy of the divine Providence:

“It is true that God exercises this Providence toward all creatures, and especially toward all men and women, as much toward pagans and heretics as toward others, whoever they be. Without this Providence they would undoubtedly perish. However, it is important to know that He extends a much more particular Providence toward His children who are Christians.² Even among these there are some, as we see in today's Gospel, who merit a more special care from Our Lord. These aspire to perfection, and, to attain it, they are not content to follow Him on the flowery plain of consolation, but courageously follow Him even in the deserts, as far as the summit of that high mountain in today's Gospel. There were many who saw the Saviour while He was going about instructing and healing people, but who did not follow Him. There were others who, thus seeing Him, did follow Him—but only as far as the foot of the mountain, content to accompany Him in the plain and through pleasant and easy paths. But a thousand times happier were those who saw Him and followed Him not only to the foot of the mountain, but, carried on by the love they bore Him, ascended with Him, divested of every care except to please Him. Thus they merited that the Divine Goodness should take care of them and even provide for them a miraculous banquet, lest they faint on the way from hunger.”³

Let’s come with joy to the divine banquet, to receive with humility the necessary food, which will give our soul the strength to accept the roses with their thorns, to ornate this garden of our soul God entrusted to our care, to deploy more and more the joy He has in the company of his beloved sons, redeemed by the Holy Blood of His unique Son, Our lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

¹ Col., I, 24.

² Gal., VI,10; I Tim. IV,10.

³ St Francis de Sales, Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, 6th March 1622.