

## Fourth Sunday of Lent

I bought my car used about a year ago, and two months later the battery died. It happened inconveniently in a covered garage. Well, no matter where you are, it's inconvenient when the battery dies. A rescue truck managed to get down there to jumpstart me, but I was a little upset that the car I just bought had just broken down. In truth, you never know when a battery will die. If you say, "It worked fine yesterday," well, that was yesterday. Today it's not working. The company where I bought the car was under no obligation to replace the battery. I had signed papers and took responsibility for the vehicle. But, under the circumstances, they agreed to give me 50% off a new battery for the car. They showed mercy on me. I did nothing to deserve this mercy, and like many of you I don't expect the corporate world to be a source of mercy to customers, and especially not people who sell used cars. But they came to my rescue.

This is an insignificant example of mercy compared to the story in today's first reading. Throughout this Lent, our first readings have formed a kind of mini-series of salvation history. We've heard so far about Noah's flood, the sacrifice of Abraham, and the Ten Commandments. All these are ways that God has established a covenant with humanity, inviting us to obey his laws, and showing us divine mercy. Today's reading tells about a later incident. At this point, the chosen people have abandoned their covenant with God. Not just some of them - all of them. The political leaders, the religious leaders, and the people themselves have grown unfaithful to God, bringing false worship into the temple. Time and again, God had sent messengers to steer them back to the right course, but they did not listen to the prophets. So, finally, God got fed up. The people had abandoned him, so he abandoned the people to the merciless power of their enemies. The Second Book of Chronicles says these enemies "burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king". This was the horrible incident known as the Babylonian captivity. It separated families, destroyed homes, and sent people into exile. How did this end? Did the people finally repent and convince God to show them mercy? Apparently not. God decided to show mercy without the people repenting. God decided they had suffered enough. Mercy came to them not through their own leader, but from a pagan, Cyrus, the king of Persia, where they were held captive. Cyrus rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem and allowed the people to go back home. They did nothing to deserve this. They simply experienced the mercy of God. And they got it from a source they never expected: a gentile king. We are sinners, but we sometimes get away with our sin because God has shown us mercy. We drive too fast and don't get caught. We drink too much and don't have an accident. We turn our backs on our kids and they don't get hurt. We don't do our homework and we still pass the test. Sometimes God shows us mercy when we do not deserve it, and sometimes mercy comes from a source we never expected. Perhaps God is giving us an example. How many people are waiting for us to show them mercy? Maybe they think we never will? Are we waiting for them to change? There is another way. We can show mercy, and let them change later. We received mercy we never deserved. We can offer it as well.