

Presentation of the Lord
February 2, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 2:22-40

A few weeks ago, on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, I noted how the celebration of baptism involves both joy and sorrow. On the one hand, we rejoice in the child's entry into the Church and his receipt of the Holy Spirit; but on the other, we recognize that he is being baptized into Christ's death. He may one day have to die for the cross with which he is now indelibly marked.

We see this same dynamic present in the Presentation, both joy and sorrow at the same time. On the one hand, Jesus' Mother Mary rejoices about the things being said about her Son, that He is a "light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." And on the other hand, Simeon does not parse his words. He says to our Blessed Mother, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also." In this utterance the Nativity and the Passion of our Lord come together. Simeon foretells the death of Christ even as he rejoices over the birth of the Savior of the world.

This blending of joy for the moment and sorrow that is yet to be experienced is not unique to baptism or the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple. Most of us get the first taste of this as adults when we get married. In the very vows we speak to our beloved, we promise to be true until death do us part; and so as we gaze into each other's eyes and look forward to the joys we will know in our life together as one flesh, we at the same time contemplate the reality of widowhood—our marriage will end when one of us dies, and then will begin the mourning borne of the love we pledged to each other on our wedding day.

But even in this contemplated sadness we are comforted. The reason that Mary would mourn as she did, the reason it would feel as though a sword had pierced her soul, was that she so loved her Son that His death felt like her own. It is one thing to witness the death of one of our neighbors, but quite another to see our own flesh and blood expire before our eyes. I have attended many deaths, and I am usually able to keep it together even at the bedside of dear friends. But when my grandmother died ten years ago, I cried like a baby, and at the time we were eight hundred miles apart. Imagine, then, St. Mary's pain as she watched the brutal death her Son endured on our behalf.

Her pain should cause us to contemplate her love. Even as He poured Himself out for her, she had already poured herself out for Him. From the journey to Bethlehem to the flight into Egypt, from nursing Him as a baby to taking Him down off the cross, Mary offered countless sacrifices out of her deep and abiding love for her Son, the Son of God. We take for granted that she should suffer so.

But the reality is, before Christ the narrative of death was often different. From the Eskimos who set their elderly and lame on ice flows, to the Canaanites who killed their own children and buried them before the city gates for good luck, there were many civilizations, many societies, in which empathy and compassion were sorely lacking, if they were present at all. The Greeks even gave us the word "stoic" to describe how many of them behaved in the face of trials. We would today call such people unfeeling and heartless, but in their own day they were held in high esteem.

The uniqueness of the Christian Gospel is reflected in the bright shining sword that pierced Mary's soul. We see in that reflection the willingness to suffer with the suffering. Our neighbor's

suffering is not his own, but is for us to share, lessening his burden by taking upon ourselves some of the pain. Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus' cross for Him, and then Mary stood at Jesus' feet while her Son slowly expired. She wasn't there for herself; she was there for Him, lessening His pain by simple virtue of her presence.

The genius of such self-emptying love can be seen in the growth of hospice care units across the Christian West. We do not leave our weak and dying to suffer alone, but instead keep vigil with them, assuring them that they don't have to face death alone, and the love from which they benefit now is but a foretaste of the glory about to be revealed to them.

Contrast such fervent compassion with the ideal of the pagans, who tout suicide as the solution to suffering. Having attended so many deaths, I know that such cowardice is nothing but the easy way out—the decedent doesn't have to suffer, and his family doesn't have to suffer with him—and with every such death the love we should have for each other, the love of which by God's grace we are capable, grows colder. We are spared a bit of intense pain only to be haunted by the frightening possibility that we had never been loved at all. The suicide of the suffering really just represents his abandonment, even worse his abandonment by those who could have chosen to help him.

This contrast reveals that love requires taking a risk. We will not come out of baptism, or marriage, or parenthood, or friendship, or religious life, or any holy relationship unscathed. Our love will cost us, sometimes dearly. When we make the decision to love, we make the decision to suffer, if the love to which we aspire is the kind that Jesus offered and Mary embraced.

Ultimately we know that we can love unreservedly because the light of the world still shines. Our faith informs us that Jesus lives, that His passion was not the end, and that when we suffer for love as He did, He will be waiting for us on the other side. Indeed, He is with us every step of the way. We don't have to protect ourselves from true love because God, who is Love, has protected us from death. We can suffer now because a Day is coming when all pain will cease, and every tear will be wiped away. The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, as St. John the Evangelist reminds us.

Imagine how different the world would be if Jesus and Mary had tried to protect themselves from the pain inherent to true love. Imagine how many of us would not even exist if our parents had tried to avoid the suffering that sacrifice entails. How hollow this world would be if Christians did not proclaim the truth that, yes, suffering will accompany our joys, but the tears are well worth it. Our world is enriched through our pain far more than we are diminished by it. Indeed, were we not to offer the love we do, the suffering of our neighbors could well be more than we could bear to see. The love we refused to give would be the love they never knew, and the world would be poorer because we kept our gifts to ourselves. But thanks be to God, this isn't the case at all, and the same sword that pierced Mary's soul yet pierces ours, as well.