

First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 1:12-15

So much of what we read in the Old Testament prefigures what is finally fully revealed in the New Testament. This is certainly the case in the lessons today. In our lesson from Genesis Noah receives from God the promise that “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” St. Peter points out in his epistle that this prefigures our salvation through the waters of baptism, and thus it prefigures our redemption in the Blood of Christ.

What jumps out at me in the lesson from Genesis is that God desires life. Yes, he destroyed most of the world’s population, but in saving Noah, his family, and the animals, we see that God’s desire for mankind is not death but life. The story of Noah prefigures our redemption in Jesus because Christ’s death on the cross shows us that God would rather take on our human nature and die on our behalf than see us perish eternally, spend eternity in hell. In the same way that God did not desire death for Noah, neither does God desire death for any of Noah’s descendants.

God does not want to wipe out most of the world’s population, but there are many still today who see death as the solution to the challenges we humans face. If the Good News that Jesus wants us to believe in is that God desires life for us and not death, then what we must repent of is our insistence all too often that death is the way forward. As Jesus contrasts the life God wants for us with the death we so frequently choose for ourselves, so in order for us to believe in life, we must repent of death.

Before we examine this beautiful life that God desires for us, prefigured in the Old Covenant and established in the New, we must first see how death is proposed as a solution, or the means to the accomplishment of objectives. It is easy to gaze far afield and see that Islamic terrorism, for example, seeks to accomplish its ends through the sowing of death. Whether it’s the Islamic State beheading Christians on a Libyan beach or Al Qaeda bringing down the twin towers with jets turned into missiles, the Muslim terrorists imagine that killing the innocent will advance their purpose. They are in this way very similar to the Communists and Nazis, enemies of the United States that our nation faced respectively in the Cold War and World War II. The War on Terror in which we are still engaged is a war against those who kill the innocent to advance their purpose.

The task of looking for manifestations of the world’s attraction and attachment to death becomes more uncomfortable when we begin to look closer to home. The legalization of abortion in this country beginning forty-eight years ago, in California, proposed death as the solution to any number of difficulties we face. Killing the innocent child enables a woman to bear only the number of children she wants when she wants them, what we euphemistically call today ‘reproductive freedom’. The placement of abortion clinics in low-income neighborhoods implies that killing the innocent child is the means to economic development and the end of material poverty for our poorer citizens. And today advocates of legalized abortion preposterously claim that killing the innocent child will solve the problem of crime, since killing poor people before they are born means fewer criminals coming out of the poorer classes, fewer criminals coming out of the ghetto, to victimize the general population. The fact that there’s no way to tell before

he is even born whether a particular poor person will become a criminal is evidently lost on such cheerleaders for mass murder. I bring up this issue of abortion simply to point out that Islamic terrorists are not the only peddlers today of the culture of death. Many of our fellow citizens are champions of the same slaughter the Islamic State is committing right now, though the slaughter in America doesn't take place in front of movie cameras but behind the closed doors of our nation's abortion clinics. Terrorism and abortion both propose that death is an acceptable means to advance one's purpose.

Therefore, it is the duty of those who believe in the Gospel, the duty of those who believe in the Good News, to call our world to repentance and propose the alternative to the embrace of death. That is, Catholics must be tireless proponents of the truth that God's solution to the world's problems is life. This is what distinguishes the Church from nearly every other institution in the world, and the Church's stance on the sanctity and value of human life is a compelling truth that continues to draw people into the Church. Recall, as I've told you before, that we have five hundred million more Catholics today than there were in 1978 at the advent of St. John Paul's papacy. The Church's growth is explosive, and the Gospel of Life helps to explain this growth.

Human life is sacred from conception until natural death because each human being is a unique creation of God, made in His image and redeemed in the Blood of His Son. Human life therefore must be understood as belonging to God Himself and the right to life is thus inherent to our nature, not something other people may grant or take away simply by virtue of their power or influence over their vulnerable neighbors. We say, then, that the right to life must be made inviolable, secure from violation, since in America and so many other nations this is certainly not the case. Our constitution says that the right to life may not be infringed without due process, but in practice this article of our nation's founding document is routinely ignored, by our judges, by our congress, by our president.

How do we raise the consciousness of our neighbors so that the Church's defense of the right to life is something they embrace? How do we convince our secular neighbors to join us in standing up for the right to life so that we together can repent of this culture of death we have now and forge a culture of life?

I believe we must call our neighbors to repentance by showing them how uniquely precious each of our neighbors is. We must point out the special gifts that each person receives, and how those gifts are used to benefit the whole human family. In the Church we celebrate the saints, but even those without any religion have civic heroes, war heroes, family members, their mentors and teachers, others who have impacted their lives in a positive way, people they look up to. We must ask them, "What would your life be like without those people? How would your life be diminished if their lives had been squandered by the culture of death? Are they not invaluable, irreplaceable witnesses to the universal value of each and every human life?"

This appeal to love the neighbors we don't know as much as we love those we know must be grounded in God's love for all people, a love so profound that He offered Himself for the life of each of His children. This genuine altruism is what guides our own defense of the right to human life: just as Jesus died in order that others might live, so our advocacy, the advocacy of the Church, is intended to save the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors. We aren't asking just for something for ourselves, for we have our lives. We are asking that the weak, the invisible, the needy and the unwanted may have the same thing. The reason our appeal for life will convince and ultimately prevail is that it is the summons of the cross, the beauty of sacrifice, the medicine of unconditional love.