

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 3:14-21

When we talk about judgment in the Church, we usually mean one of two things. We think first, of course, about the judgment that will take place at the end of our earthly lives, or when Jesus returns again to judge the living and the dead. This judgment will determine whether we each as individuals experience eternal salvation or condemnation. The second way we think of judgment refers to passing judgment upon a particular action or soul. It is right to judge deeds, based on God's Word and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, as either evil or good. On the other hand, it is wrong to judge another person's soul as being worthy of eternal bliss or punishment. We judge the person's actions, not the person.

In our Gospel today, though, Jesus introduces us to another manner of judgment, one that becomes obvious once we begin to observe it, but which has to do with how God created the world and redeemed it in His Son, rather than any specific agency on our part - or on the part of Jesus at the end of time. It is a judgment that is built into the cosmos, the judgment that is called the moral law.

Jesus said, "...this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Good deeds, you see, are a judgment upon evil deeds, since the light shines on wickedness and shows it to be wicked by virtue of the light's goodness. The Church thus serves as a sign that is spoken against, since the workers of iniquity prefer their wickedness to the virtue of the faithful. This form of judgment requires some unpacking to see it clearly, so this will be our focus today.

When Jesus says that the light coming into the world is the judgment, we need only note the contrast between goodness and wickedness. In this context, just as an example, sobriety is a judgment upon wickedness. Though the sober person does not utter a word and might not even know he is being observed, his sobriety and its benefits contrast so markedly with the rotten fruits of drunkenness that drunkenness is judged. My children still talk to me about Parade Day 2010, when they observed a number of intoxicated revelers at a basketball game we had gone to watch. They were appalled, not because they knew what drunkenness was, but because they knew what sobriety is. No one passed judgment, but sobriety was seen to be clearly superior to drunkenness. The sober example of their friends and family won them over.

This same dynamic can be seen in the way that chastity is a judgment upon licentiousness, and honesty is a judgment upon lying, and charity is a judgment upon greed, and sacrifice is a judgment upon selfishness. Whenever there is a virtue, it is seen to be a judgment upon its opposite vice, in that the practice of the virtue demonstrates its superiority to the pursuit of the vice.

The practice of such virtue occasionally has the power to convict the world because the world stands judged. On our recent trip to Texas I took my family to Birmingham, Alabama, to the 16th Street Baptist Church, where four girls in Sunday School were killed by a bomb planted by the KKK. Across the street there is a park that has a model of the water cannons Bull Conner had specially made to accost

those who marched for the end of institutionalized segregation and discrimination. The non-violence of the protesters exposed the brutality of their oppressors. Bringing that violence to light allowed the Church and other Christian communities to be agents of change. In that one case, at least, men did not love the darkness rather than the light.

Unfortunately, in many other realms of life, men do. Even as we decry child abuse, we keep abortion legal. As we stigmatize cigarette smoking, we legalize marijuana. As we raise awareness about cancer, we deny the link between the pill and breast cancer. I could go on, but the point of these examples is to show that Jesus' words remain true today: men do "... [love] darkness rather than light, because their deeds [are] evil."

To preserve their evil deeds and the freedom to practice them, the Church is made a straw man, as the world pretends that the Catholic faithful are the greatest threat to human freedom and peace between peoples. Though the Church possesses no temporal power at all to coerce people into conformity with her precepts, she is vilified as the enemy of progress and the oppressor of the poor. God's judgment upon immorality, revealed through the moral law, leads the lovers of darkness to deny God's instrument of light and truth, our Holy Mother Church.

What the lovers of darkness are forced to do is to deny that the actions they choose to take are what actually deprive them of liberty and cause conflict between people. They look for and set up a straw man because they refuse to acknowledge that their own choices limit their potential. This is what Jesus means when He says in the Gospel today, "He who believes in him is not condemned, he who does not believe is condemned already." The refusal to accept the judgment, acknowledge the moral law, and then act accordingly means the lovers of darkness are consigned to misery—in the life to come, certainly, but also in this life right now. They are condemned already, before they even get to hell.

The Good News is found in today's final verse: "He who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God." Those of us who conform our lives to the moral law, whose superiority can be observed by all those with eyes to see, can accomplish what the Civil Rights workers did fifty years ago: we are able through our good deeds to show God's judgment upon sin without even uttering a word. As surely as our neighbors see that adultery breeds conflict, they will see marital fidelity brings peace. As stealing breeds mistrust, so respect for private property and the just reward of labor brings about comity. As greed sews discontent and resentment, so charity issues in reconciliation. Examples abound, but the message is the same: when Catholics bring their deeds into the light, God is glorified and the condemned are converted.

So herein is the promise of God's judgment upon sin that is never spoken and yet is pronounced before the end of time: it leads people to the light. If we could actually do whatever our impulses demand and still suffer no adverse consequences, we might never change. But God has so designed the world, so molded our hearts, that we are drawn to the beautiful and the good, even if we've first chosen the ugly and the bad. So long as there are people willing to do what is true and come to the light, there will be instruments of God's judgment that lead sinners to His mercy. So be that instrument, so that our neighbors may truly see that "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."