

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Passion Sunday

March 18, 2018

Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

of

St. Thomas More Catholic Parish

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore St.

Scranton, PA 18508

John 12:20-33

Thirty years ago, I was a paperboy in Bethlehem, PA, preparing to depart for college in the fall. On this weekend in March, 1988, I read as I delivered my papers about two Protestant policemen in Belfast, Northern Ireland, who were beaten, shot, stripped naked, and publicly hanged by a mob that had formed out of a funeral procession. The anger I felt about that one incident stayed with me for months, and it soon turned to vengeance. I remember telling my Catholic roommate, words I now deeply regret, that I would shoot the terrorists myself if I were given the chance.

Years later, after I had been reconciled to the Church and know a lot more about the Troubles in Northern Ireland than I did as a seventeen-year-old punk, I recalled that newspaper article and did research on how that incident had come about. I learned that it was part of a two-week period of escalating reciprocal violence between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. I learned a Catholic priest had tried to intervene and save the lives of the policemen but was ignored after the mob discovered military identification on the men. I learned that the rage I felt had fueled this conflict for centuries and that it was more a tribal conflict than a religious one.

Jesus said in the Gospel today, “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” The ruler of this world, of course, is Satan, and Jesus points forward to his crucifixion as the means by which Satan would be conquered. Moreover, by means of the cross, Jesus says, He will draw all men to Himself. How is it that the murder of God will cast out Satan and at the same time draw all men to Jesus Christ?

To understand Jesus’ counterstroke, we must see clearly what the devil promotes, which is hatred and vengeance. Satan uses all kinds of means to convince us to hate our neighbors, to see them as rivals with whom we are in competition and, seeing them in this way, to feel justified in harming them. Covetousness quickly gives way to theft and adultery, even as jealousy and envy are manifested in violence and murder. Having led us into temptation, Satan cleverly proposes the solution to our suffering, which is to exact vengeance upon those who have wronged us. In paying heed to hatred and violent revenge, we become entrapped in a cycle of reprisals with no end in sight, though often we’ve forgotten how it all started.

Jesus’ solution in the cross is to love His enemies. Though He has the power to summon legions of angels to strike down those who wish Him harm, Jesus takes the violence upon Himself and refuses to respond in kind. Rather than hate those who hate Him, He loves those who hate Him, praying for the very people who nailed Him to the tree. But Jesus does even more than pray for them; He forgives them. The cycle of violence continues when hatred issues in vengeance. Likewise, the possibility for reconciliation opens up when out of love for our enemies we forgive them. When Jesus’ prayer from the cross becomes ours, we see the way out of intractable conflicts.

We are drawn to the cross precisely because it communicates the truth that God loves us so much He has forgiven us for crucifying Him. The devil wants to see us fight a battle we can't win, but God has no interest in this. What the Lord desires instead is that we be at peace both with Him and our neighbors, that hatred and vengeance cease, replaced by the love and forgiveness whose fruit is peace. Satan is cast out of our lives when we embrace the Lord's program.

Four years after I read that article, I was living in London, England, and I expressed a desire to cross the sea and visit Ulster, where my college roommate's mother had grown up. She wrote back to me, twenty-six years ago this month, and told me I was too stupid to go to Northern Ireland and that I'd only get myself in trouble. I was twenty-one by then, but she perceived I was still an ignorant and angry punk. She was right, of course, so I took her advice and stayed in London.

So what changed and opened my heart to the grace of forgiveness, enabling me finally to be reconciled to Holy Mother Church, even ordained to the Holy Priesthood? Shortly after I got back from London, I began assembling a collection of albums by Van Morrison. Sir George Ivan Morrison grew up in a Protestant neighborhood in Belfast, but he did not sing about a desire for vengeance, or the glories of conflict and victory, as so much traditional Irish folk music does. His songs were instead a lament, and he goes so far as to pray for Jesus' return in glory so that the Troubles would finally end. In listening to Van Morrison sing, I felt his pain, and my desire became reconciliation, also.

This doesn't mean I had nothing to forgive. One of the first stories I heard when I arrived in Scranton in 1997 was told me by a dear friend who was so scandalized that he said he could never become Catholic. He recounted seeing at a banquet the Bishop of Scranton seated right next to an impenitent terrorist from Northern Ireland, who was then feted by the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. When my wife and I decided to come into the Church, we sought and received my friend's blessing; but he never came over himself. He died a few years ago, true to his word, still supportive of the choice we had made, but one which he could not make for himself, one of the many old friends whose absence here is still painful to me.

That pain, however, is mitigated by forgiveness. Long before I was ordained, long before I became Catholic, I forgave the Bishop of Scranton for his grotesque indiscretion and prayed that my friend could find it in his heart to forgive him, as well. Forgiveness freed me. It gave me the liberty to do what is right, what God had been calling me to do for a long time, a call I could not hear because vengeance had stopped my ears and hardened my heart.

This freedom has allowed me to love in ways I could not have imagined when I was still young and angry. My roommate's dad died last year, and I was able to travel to New Jersey to concelebrate the Requiem Mass, but before I did I asked his mother's permission. She readily gave it and was grateful we came. Praise be to God that one of Northern Ireland's Protestant sons I don't know helped me to love the only Catholic daughter of Ulster I do.