

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 12:20-33

Just because the word “Greek” is used in our Gospel today in reference to those who wished to see Jesus, it does not mean that those people were from Greece. Throughout the New Testament the word “Greek” is almost always interchangeable with Gentile, meaning that those who wished to see Jesus were non-Jews. In all likelihood, since they had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, the biggest Jewish feast of the year, they were what the Jews called “God-fearers.” God-fearers believed in God, even worshiped at the local synagogue and made pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, but they had not formally undergone conversion to Judaism.

Our Gospel begins, then, with the God-fearing Gentiles desirous to see the man being proclaimed as the Jewish Messiah. Remember that at this point in John’s Gospel the entry into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, had already happened. The Jewish authorities are already plotting to collaborate in Jesus’ death, having declared that it is expedient for one man to die rather than see the Romans come and destroy the entire Jewish nation. Therefore, we are supposed to note the irony that as Jesus’ own people receive Him not, the Gentiles wish to see Him.

However, Jesus does not see the Gentiles. His mission while He yet walked the earth, before the crucifixion, was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. He has two disciples, Philip and Andrew, with Greek names, so he has laid the groundwork for the eventual mission to the Gentiles; but instead of seeing the Greeks, Jesus launches into a discourse, joined by His heavenly Father, on the necessity of the crucifixion. So our Gospel begins with the Gentiles wishing to see Jesus, and it ends with Jesus telling the disciples how He will be seen: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

Here again we see Jesus laying the groundwork for the Church’s mission to the Gentiles. Jesus is not merely the Jewish Messiah, He is the Messiah; and He will not just draw Jews to the foot of the cross, He will draw all men to Himself. Jesus’ point to His disciples is that if people came to them looking for Him, they must point the seekers to the cross. They have heard about the miracles, how Jesus can turn water into wine, make the blind see, and even raise people from the dead. But the disciples must tell those who wish to see Jesus that if they want to see Him, they must look to the cross.

It comes as no surprise, then, that eleven of the original twelve apostles received the martyrs’ palm, dying for the Faith, from India to Italy and many places in-between. They had simply understood and put into practice the words of today’s Gospel: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me.” The disciples did follow Jesus, all the way to Calvary, where they offered their lives in order that their deaths, like the death of Jesus Himself, would bear much fruit.

This reality has implications for our own lives. The death of Jesus must not be one we seek to avoid. Jesus, knowing that His hour was about to come, was troubled, so He asked rhetorically whether He should ask the Father to save Him. He rejects this and is resolute. “For this purpose I have come to this hour.” The same then would be true with any of Jesus’ disciples that may have to face martyrdom

themselves: They are not to shrink from the call; we are not to shrink from the call, as the purpose is to draw all men to the foot of the cross.

We may indeed find ourselves one day called to be martyrs. The twenty-one Coptic Christians who died for their faith earlier this year had not gone to Libya as missionaries, but as laborers, migrants looking for work because there was not work for them in their native Egypt. Yet even though they were not missionaries, they became apostles for Christ because they were willing to accept the cross before they would deny their Lord. However unlikely martyrdom is in this country, we could find ourselves in similar unforeseen circumstances whereby the cross we bear would be literal. I don't want to discount this possibility, but the palm of martyrdom is unlikely for most of us.

The question, therefore, is how we die a death that will draw all men to Jesus without literally dying. How do we die to bear much fruit? How do we hate our life in this world when no one is actually trying to nail us to a tree?

Jesus gives us a clue when He says of His own crucifixion, "Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out." The crucifixion, in other words, broke the power of the evil one. Satan imagined that in killing Jesus the powers of darkness would triumph. What the devil didn't see coming was the resurrection. In His triumph over sin and death Jesus is effectively the one in charge, but He exercises His great power in terms of service. We have to be so confident in Christ's victory over death that we are free to serve those who are dying. The death we die while still alive is to die to the ways of the world.

We cannot fall prey to the devil's conceit that he is still really in charge. As the world seems to be falling apart all around us, we will be tempted to use the devil's methods to win: deceit, power politics, coercion, fear-mongering and hatred. Seeing the success with which he has wielded these tools, we may lose confidence in the method Jesus used when He bound the strong man and plundered his house. Jesus has won, so He is calling us to use the same means as we endeavor to win people, even entire nations, to the truth of the cross.

And the means He has used to draw all men to Himself have not been in displays of power that instill fear and foreboding about the judgment to come or about the life we might lose. Nor has He lied or ever used bait-and-switch to convince us to sign up. He told us from the beginning what to expect. Rather, the Lord has striven to show us the depth of His great love for us through the sacrifices He makes on our behalf. To carry our cross, to suffer martyrdom without literally dying, we must do the same: demonstrate the depth of our great love for all men by making sacrifices that benefit them. People will know we love them when they see that we are willing to suffer for them. This dynamic is far more attractive than the doubt that is introduced when we ask others to suffer to benefit us.

The level of our service, then, is based on the level of our confidence that we are already on the winning team. To question Jesus' methods is to wonder if He actually still reigns. We can die to self, while we yet walk the earth, if we turn aside from strength and embrace the weakness that is stronger than death.