

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

March 24, 2013

Homily for the Anglican Use Mass

of

St. Thomas More Catholic Parish

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

Scranton, PA

Luke 22:14-23:56

At the Academy Awards in 1967 the Best Picture Oscar went to the film *A Man for All Seasons*, the movie adaptation of the play by Robert Bolt. The subject is our parish's patron, St. Thomas More, and his struggle to remain faithful to his conscience and the Catholic Church as England's monarch, Henry VIII, tries various means to get him to abandon his principles. In one of my favorite scenes Thomas is summoned to London, whereupon Henry's henchmen try to threaten him into acquiescing to the King's demands. St. Thomas More responds by telling them, "Terrors are for children."

The Passion we just heard is full of such terrors, but unfortunately the ones succumbing to them are not children, but adults who should have known better. First, we have the crowd, who for years had been terrorized by the soldiers of the Roman Empire, the military force that occupied Jerusalem and what is today the nation of Israel. St. Luke tells us elsewhere in his Gospel that Pontius Pilate, prior to the crucifixion of Jesus, had killed a number of people in the Temple while they were offering their annual sacrifices to God. Secular historians tell us that Pilate was later removed as Procurator of Judea because of his extreme cruelty.

But on the day of our Lord's Passion it was the crowd that had Pilate terrified. The rebellion of the Jews was a constant concern for the Romans, and St. Luke tells us in the Gospel today that Barabbas, whom Pilate eventually released, had been put in prison for insurrection and murder. Eventually, in 66 A.D., the Jews would rebel, throwing the Romans out of Jerusalem until Titus reconquered the city four years later. On this day, though, Pilate was concerned that a riot was about to begin as the crowd called out for the crucifixion of Jesus. A riot could quickly get out of control, so for this reason Pilate ordered the crucifixion of the innocent Jesus to placate and calm the angry crowd.

What we see, then, is that both the crowd and Pontius Pilate spoke only the language of terror. Indeed, they only understood and responded to the language of terror. They took actions based not on virtue, on principle, or on love, but on fear; and they thought initially that Jesus could be motivated in the same way to strike fear into the hearts of those who tortured and killed him. After all, the crowd had expected him to be a military messiah, the revolutionary type, who would help throw off the Roman yoke by force. And while he was on the cross, this expectation for Jesus did not dissipate. The rulers mocked Him and demanded He come down off the cross; and even one of the men crucified with Jesus told Him that if He really were the Christ, He would use His power to preserve their earthly lives.

The problem with the assumption that Jesus spoke the language of terror is that Jesus made clear He comes among us as one who serves. He tells His disciples in the Passion today, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise leadership over them." Jesus confronts here the two ways that we can exercise leadership. The way of Pontius Pilate and the crowd is to use the threat of violence to motivate people. The way of Jesus is to use love, humble acts of service, such as the washing of the feet, to demonstrate his willingness to make sacrifices for His children.

Jesus understood that while fear may inspire obedience, it also foments hatred. That is, the terrorist is not loved, but hated; and whatever victory he is able to achieve through threats and violence is

by its very nature merely temporary. That's because his violence against his subjects teaches them to behave in exactly the same way; and they do. The language of terror is a cycle of violence that cannot end without the intervention of the cross.

You see, the crowd eventually got what it wanted. Military men kicked the Romans out, but then inflicted a reign of terror on Jerusalem that made Roman rule look like a picnic. The very people who had chafed under the iron fist of the Roman army committed atrocities against their own countrymen that are so gross that it would be inappropriate for me to describe them within the context of the Mass. The Romans responded in 70 A.D. with a level of violence never seen before and then commemorated their barbarism with the Arch of Titus, a monument that still stands in Rome today, nearly two thousand years later.

The point is that coercion doesn't work. Of course, we use terrors for children when they are young so that they learn there are consequences for immoral actions. We use them for children precisely because we don't want them to get really hurt when they step out into the world. But as they grow older, we want more than obedience from our children. We want them to love and respect us as much as we love and cherish them; so as they mature, the terrors cease and we appeal to their conscience. We ask them to make the same sacrifices for us as we have made for them. Terrors for children give way to the love of Christ, parents pouring themselves out and children responding in kind.

How sad it is that governments so often choose a different model, and that families take their cue from the state: parents and children in enmity with each other as adults try to force their wills upon each other through various means of coercion. When terrors for children extend beyond childhood we see families in perpetual conflict, and the result is eventually every bit as tragic as was the burned and razed city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

In the cross Jesus proposes an alternative to the violence that claimed his life. He proposes an alternative to the terrors that too often tear our families to pieces, bearing the rotten fruits of resentment, anger, vengeance, and hatred. What He proposes is that we refuse to be frightened by terrors for children. Even if we are a little scared, He insists that we not give in to fear, that like St. Thomas More, our patron, we remain firm in our faith and in our convictions even as the adversary threatens our very lives. Jesus asks that we do this out of our profound love for God, who, while we were yet sinners, "being in human form . . . humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

Therefore, even this Passion Sunday, we look forward to the Feast of the Resurrection that we will celebrate next week. It is our confidence in our Risen Lord that teaches us we can end the cycle of threats, violence, and death by forgiving our persecutors and refusing to treat them as we've been treated. We run the risk of losing our earthly lives, of course, but this is how perfect love casts out fear. We aren't scared to love because, whatever happens to us, like St. Thomas More, like Jesus Himself, we know we'll live.