

Seventh Sunday after Trinity
July 10, 2016
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
Scranton, PA
Luke 10:25-37

As you know, I've been teaching a class on-line about the saints and martyrs of the British Isles. This past week we learned about the martyrs under Elizabeth I, who spent her reign killing Catholics in order to establish Protestantism as the state religion in Great Britain. Her focus upon what she considered to be her internal enemies caused her to neglect the actual mortal threat that was standing at the gates during her reign in the late sixteenth century.

I pointed out in the class that England did not send one unit of soldiers, not one ship, not one sailor, to the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Elizabeth's desire to consolidate her power made her blind to the threat posed by the Ottoman Turks, who had assembled a massive fleet to dominate the Mediterranean Sea and facilitate the invasion of Europe. Though Elizabeth did not recognize the threat, the Pope who excommunicated her did. Pope St. Pius V assembled a naval force from Italy, Spain, and Malta, along with thousands of German infantry, that confronted and destroyed the Ottoman Navy on October 7, 1571. We still celebrate that victory every year on October 7, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. The only English soldiers present at the battle were those who had entered the Church's military orders prior to Elizabeth's becoming queen in 1558.

The myopia about who the real enemy is also afflicted many of Jesus' contemporaries when He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we just heard. Even as the Roman Empire ran roughshod over the freedom of the Jews, many people saw as their principal rival the Samaritans. The Samaritans were descendants of the tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who intermarried with the Assyrians after the Northern Kingdom fell. Many Jews despised the Samaritans as apostate Jews who were worse than Gentiles, because they had once had the truth but had abandoned it. That was why the parable of the Good Samaritan was so shocking. Jesus portrayed a Samaritan as being a more faithful follower of the Mosaic Law than either the Levite or the priest. His portrayal of a righteous Samaritan should have led his hearers to consider who the real enemy was.

This is not to say that Jesus considered the Romans to be the real enemy, either. Remember in the story about how Jesus healed the centurion's servant, which we heard just a few weeks ago, that Jesus said, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith." Jesus went to great lengths to demonstrate that the righteous are found in every nation, Samaria and Rome included. In pointing out who the real enemy is, Jesus did not desire to point the finger at any people or nation.

Instead, he went after human pride. Our Gospel this morning indicates that the lawyer that was testing Jesus desired to justify himself when he asked the question about who his neighbor was. The lawyer imagined that he had fulfilled the requirements of the law by loving God and his neighbor. Jesus pointed out that he had not, by giving the lawyer a more expansive vision of who his neighbor actually is. Even people he considered his rivals, even people he considered his inferiors, those are his neighbor also; and they sometimes prove themselves better neighbors than those the lawyer thought of as his friends and his neighbors.

At the root of these human rivalries from which we suffer is this desire to justify ourselves. We desire to place ourselves in a morally superior light to the people we consider our enemies. This was certainly the case with the lawyer who tested Jesus, certainly the case with the Jews as related to their interaction with the Samaritans. And it was very much the case in Elizabeth's dealings with her Catholic subjects. Even as the Spanish were saving Europe from Muslim invasion, Elizabeth was pouring money into fighting the Spanish in the Netherlands. She sent 7,000 troops to the Low Countries and her soldiers brought home medals cast by the Dutch that read, "Better Turk than Papist." The medal was in the shape of a crescent moon, the symbol of Islam. Their Protestant pride led them to the absurd conclusion that they would sooner have Muslim overlords than be reconciled to Holy Mother Church.

Pride blinds us to the reality of the circumstances before our very eyes. And pride that is magnified by self-righteousness leads us to ridiculous conclusions. One would think, after five police officers were gunned down in one day in Dallas by a man who said he wanted to kill white people, that the nation-wide protest movement called Black Lives Matter might take a short break out of respect for the dead. Out of respect for the victims and their families perhaps they might cool it for a while. Alas, this was not to be, as the allure of self-righteousness is very powerful. Last night, just 48 hours after those police were killed, protesters attacked police in Minnesota with Molotov cocktails, rocks, and fireworks. I'm not joking, but I wish it were fiction.

These absurd conclusions and the wicked deeds that proceed from them all derive from a failure to recognize man's true enemy. Naturally we want to locate evil externally, outside of ourselves. So the Jews saw it in the Samaritans. Elizabeth I saw it in the Catholics, and the Black Lives Matter movement sees it in the nation's police forces. All of them are wrong, as are Samaritans that locate wickedness in Jews, Catholics who locate it in Protestants, and police who see it mostly in black people. In pointing to pride, Jesus reminds us that the enemy is within. The locus of evil is within the human heart, and this ought to give us pause when we want to justify ourselves, whenever we want to feel morally superior in order that we may condemn our neighbor. The standard set for us is never our own righteousness, but God's. We are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Therefore, the road to peace comes first in recognizing that we are as in need of forgiveness as those who have beaten us, stripped us, and left us half dead on the side of the road. We are all sinners in need of redemption, dependent wholly upon God's grace for the life we have received and the eternal life we hope to receive.

This recognition should lead us to the correct conclusion, that what is needed is not more self-righteousness—that I've been saved and you haven't. What is needed is compassion for those who are the victims of sin, compassion that is irrespective of the rivalries to which our culture has made us beholden. Our duty is to love without reference to whether the naked and bloody man lying in the gutter had ancestors who hurt our ancestors.

We are not to be blind to the wickedness that resides within our hearts; we are rather to love blindly. When we love in this way, without preferring the lowly or deferring to the great, we will then be best equipped to see who is failing most gravely in this regard and is thus the greatest actual threat to life and liberty. If our love is flawed, so will be our ability to assess who is really dangerous. When our love is flawed, we inhibit our ability to see moderate threats as distinguished from those that come straight out of hell and have the devil's handprints all over them. To purify our love, we must recognize our need for God's love and then show it to those who need it. Only after we've taken the log out of our own eye will we be able to see clearly so we can take the speck out of our neighbor's.