

Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord
December 24, 2013
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 1:1-25

We had two references tonight to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, that time after 586 B.C. when Solomon's Temple was destroyed, Jerusalem lay in ruins, and the nobility and mercantile class of the Jews had been deported to Babylon, in modern day Iraq. The first reference is quite obvious, in the genealogy of Jesus, where St. Matthew tells us there were fourteen generations between the deportation to Babylon and the birth of the Christ. The second reference is less obvious, but can be found in the words of the prophet Isaiah, where he refers to the land of the Jews as Desolate and Forsaken. These terms, of course, referred not only to the land, but to the Jewish people themselves, defeated militarily, powerless politically and dispersed throughout the known world as retribution from God for their faithlessness to the Old Covenant.

Yet even as Isaiah references the deportation to Babylon, he assures the Jews that Jerusalem's "vindication will go forth as brightness and her salvation as a burning torch." Moreover, he promises that "the nations shall see your vindication, and all the Kings your glory." How has this vindication been manifested, and can it be said that the Kings of the earth have seen the glory of Zion and Jerusalem?

We are tempted to look for this vindication, this glory in displays of power, but we know from history that the expanse of King David's earthly realm has never since been replicated. Not only that, Jerusalem's Temple was rebuilt, only to be destroyed a little more than six hundred years later, when the Romans general Titus destroyed the city again. The Temple has never been rebuilt since, and the nation of Israel could hardly be described as a world power anyway. If not in manifestation of worldly power, then how does this vindication shine forth?

It began more than two thousand years ago with the birth of Jesus, and it continues to this day by the presence of the Church in the world. The vindication and the glory are real, but they are not political, nor are they military. This vindication and this glory can be seen in the way the vulnerable and the helpless are viewed and treated. That is, where the weak and vulnerable were once universally designated for destruction, and in the case of the Jews, deportation, since the birth of Jesus the weak are now seen as those in need of protection and providence.

A couple of illustrations will help me here clarify my point. Just this year a man up in Wayne County was sent to prison for life for killing his own child shortly after birth. At the time Jesus was born this was legal throughout the Roman Empire if the baby born was female. Not only would a father not go to prison for life for this crime, he would be applauded for preserving his limited resources for the sons that might be born to him in the future. Today, even in a nation with nearly unrestricted access to abortion, we still recoil at the notion of infanticide, and every corner of the globe touched by the mission of the Church recoils with us.

A second illustration: I am old enough to remember vividly the AIDS crisis of the early and mid-eighties that disproportionately affected people who self-identified as homosexual. Though most who were afflicted with the disease were victims of their own choices, the images of such horrible suffering humanized a segment of our population for which few at the time had much sympathy. The image of the

homosexual as helpless and vulnerable played a large role in the cultural acceptance of the very behavior that caused so many to suffer so much. The impulse to reach out to those in need helped provoke a cultural shift in how these people are treated, so much so that expressions condemning immoral behavior are now more vilified than the immoral behavior itself.

This particular development is troubling, but the success with which one's image as a victim has been parlayed into a political advantage shows the degree to which we in the West reflexively do the opposite of what was the norm on the day Jesus was born. We do not consider it a good to victimize the vulnerable, as Herod did when he slaughtered the innocents in Bethlehem, as Titus did when he enslaved the survivors of the siege of Jerusalem and then forced them to build the Coliseum in Rome. Why do we look upon the weak and help them rather than kill them? Why do we see the helpless and feed them rather than enslave them?

This change in the behavior of Western man, this change in his orientation, is attributable only to the Man whose birthday we celebrate today. Jerusalem's vindication, her restored glory, began with the birth of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, Who came to us not in power but as a little child. The conscience of the West has been formed by its conversion to Christianity, so that we see the vulnerable Baby in the manger as one who needs to be protected, not exploited. We see Herod as a butcher and Titus as a gross violator of the rights of man, a war criminal who would today be tried at The Hague for genocide, but then was made Emperor of the civilized world. Jesus told us to see Him in the faces of the naked, the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned; and we do. We do because God took on human flesh, was born of our Blessed Mother and became vulnerable so that we would see in the vulnerable the face of God.

The cults that practiced human sacrifice are extinct. The religion that worshiped the leader of the state as a god hasn't been practiced in more than a thousand years. Of all the religions that existed at the time of Jesus' birth, and of all those that came to be after the first Christmas Day, the faith with the most adherents is Christianity, and the largest body of Christians in the world is the Catholic Church. The Church is the "crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord," the "royal diadem in the hand of your God."

The vulnerability of the baby in the manger prefigured the vulnerability of the Lord on the cross, just as Jesus' escape from death at the hands of Herod prefigured Jesus' victory over death in the resurrection. The vindication of Jerusalem has come in God thwarting the designs of the wicked, in the triumph of life over death. Every time we act on behalf of the vulnerable, the helpless, and the needy out of our love for the Lord Who was born in a stable, we participate in this vindication. We help make Isaiah's prophecy come true. But more than that, our acts of mercy sustain a cultural norm that desires the welfare of all the weak, an orientation that seeks justice for the innocent and God's mercy and love for all the guilty.

Our world isn't perfect. Indeed, we have much work to do. But the birth of Christ which we celebrate tonight has made our island home a far more hospitable place for the vulnerable than they had two thousand years ago. This Christmas we ought to resolve to keep it that way and make it even better through our works of mercy, works that thwart the designs of Titus and Herod, even as they give glory to the God in Whom we trust and hope.