

St. Andrew Church, Johnstown

Sunday, March 11, 2012

Homily – Opening Mass of the Infant of Prague Novena

Late one summer evening a weary truck driver pulled his tractor-trailer off Interstate 80 and stopped at local diner to have supper. He sat down at the front counter and ordered the meat loaf with mashed potatoes and gravy. Just before the waitress brought his supper, a group of tough looking guys arrived at the diner on motorcycles. When they entered the diner, they were loud, obnoxious, and their language was not meant for children.

These men piled into a booth and started yelling to the waitress that they wanted her attention. She politely told them that she would be with them shortly; she was the only waitress working that evening. These motorcycle characters were relentless.

They continued to complain as she placed the meat loaf special in front of the truck driver and then walked over to their table to take their order. As the waitress turned away, the rowdy bunch saw the truck driver make the sign of the cross and bow his head in prayer before he began to eat. They immediately called out to him, laughing and making fun of him saying a prayer like that.

The truck driver did not respond to their harassment. This just made them more furious and they started to make fun of the fact that he was rather small in stature and that he didn't have the courage to stand up to them. The truck driver continued to remain silent. Then a couple of these rowdy motorcycle guys walked over to him, physically poking him and then one picked up his plate and dumped the meatloaf and mashed potatoes on his lap.

These men were then laughing hysterically as they walked back to their place. Everyone else in the diner was silent. The boss came out from the back room and was ready to intervene. The truck driver quietly said, "I don't want any trouble." He wiped away the food, put down enough money for the meal and a tip for the waitress and headed out the door.

The waitress stood near the door as he got into his truck and started to drive away. One of the rowdy guys called out to her and said, "'Well, he's not much of a man, is he?'" The waitress replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure ain't much of a truck driver. He just ran over four motorcycles."

I thought of that story when I was reflecting on the second reading for today, where St. Paul says, the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

What a scene that must have been at the diner that evening! Foolishness and weakness were present in that story. Can you imagine the look on the faces of those rowdy, obnoxious men when they looked out the window and saw their mangled motorcycles?

I also thought of that story when I reflected on the Gospel reading in which it is unmistakable that Jesus was upset, yes even angry, when he drove the money changers out of the Temple.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the sin of anger is a desire for revenge. Of course Jesus the Son of God is without sin, so what about his apparent anger?

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, anger is also an emotion, and it is also a reaction to a perceived injustice; and it is not a sin to correct vices and safeguard justice, especially when we see others acting unjustly.

Jesus was not seeking revenge. He was not seeking to inflict bodily harm on the moneychangers. He was seeking to make a point that the vice and injustice that was expressed by the money changing and the selling of sheep, and oxen, and doves had to do with corrupting the kind of worship that God desires.

Elsewhere in the Gospel we hear Jesus teach us that it is not sacrifice that God desires; it is not the offering and sacrifice of sheep and oxen and doves that will please God and make up for our sins.

What God desires is mercy and forgiveness. That is the true sacrifice and the true worship that God asks from us; nothing more and nothing less.

Let's think about that as we find ourselves on this 3rd Sunday of Lent. We all understand that Lent has to do in a certain sense with making up for our sins; it has to do with our need for repentance and ongoing conversion.

However, the holy season of Lent is also meant to remind us that we cannot make up for our sins on our own and we cannot completely arrive at the conversion that we seek on our own.

We need a savior. That savior for us is Jesus Christ. He is the true and living Temple where our sins, our search for conversion, our worship and our desire to seek God's mercy and forgiveness all come together.

That occurs especially for us when we gather together as we are doing at this moment to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. In this sacramental celebration, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is made present again. Christ becomes our sacrifice and our offering to God.

In the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, Christ also becomes the expression of mercy and forgiveness that God desires more than anything.

- God wants to lavishly bestow on us his grace, his mercy, his forgiveness and
- God wants us to lavishly share that grace, and mercy, and forgiveness with others.

You and I should be passionate in our pursuit of that during the holy season of Lent. We hear in today's Gospel reading that when the disciples realized that when Jesus talked about a Temple that would be destroyed and would be raised up again in 3 days, and the Temple he was speaking about was the Temple of his body, it says that many came to believe the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

This evening, here at St. Andrew Parish, we see the words of St. Paul fulfilled as we reflect on and renew our belief that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

The foolishness and weakness of God has never been expressed more profoundly than in the mystery of the Incarnation. In the mystery of the Incarnation, God has been born into the world of the Blessed Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The devotion that you celebrate this time each year to the image of Jesus, the Infant of Prague is connected to the weakness of God and the foolishness of God. Jesus, the Infant of Prague is the image of a very small child, a toddler.

Most people would consider it a foolish to put their trust in a small, weak child to overcome the sin and the miseries and sufferings that they experience in life. Yet, the devotion to the image of the Infant of Prague has demonstrated that this image has miraculous powers.

What some see as foolishness and weakness has been and remains the wisest and most powerful experience of faith for countless Christians for centuries through their devotion to Christ as the Infant of Prague.

Each day of this Novena, the constant prayer is especially for mercy from Jesus, the Infant of Prague, who is

- Source of mercy
- Hope for the afflicted
- Generous protector and helper.

I have heard it said so many times, that even though an infant can sometimes disturb our peace when it cries, who can ever really be angry with such an innocent young child?

In September 2009, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, visited the Czech Republic and stopped at the shrine of the original statue of the Infant of Prague. On that occasion the Holy Father stated, “In this sacred image we contemplate the beauty of childhood and the fondness that Jesus Christ has always shown for little ones, as we read in the Gospel.”

In the same address, the Holy Father said, “The figure of the Child Jesus, the tender infant, brings home to us God’s closeness and his love. We come to understand how precious we are in his eyes, because it is through him that we in our turn have become children of God. Every human being is a child of God and therefore our brother or sister who is to be welcomed and respected.”

During this celebration of the Holy Eucharist, and during the days of this Novena, I highly recommend that you take the opportunity to seek the miraculous graces that have been known to come from devotion to Christ our Savior as the Infant of Prague.

The prayers of this Novena lend themselves to presenting to God a special intention that is important to you at this time. Maybe you want to pray for

- healing of a loved one, or
- reconciliation with someone that you have been disconnected from for some time, or
- help to overcome a habit of sin, or
- the ordinary grace of a job so that you can support your family, etc.

If you have not given any serious thought to a specific intention to bring to prayer during this Novena, may I suggest that you consider praying for other miraculous graces

- an increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious vocations in our diocese
- an end to abortion, an end to war, an end to abuse of defenseless men, women and children
- an end to useless anger
- a strengthening of families and marriages
- a renewed faith for those who are alienated from God and the Church.

There are so many more intentions that we can think about. Please do it. Please make the effort to pray for these and other intentions during the Novena.

If you focus your prayer on a specific intention or intentions during this Novena, it will go a long way to putting our houses in order; the temples that each one of us are supposed to be as a result of our baptism.

If you do, it will go a long way to restoring in our minds and hearts a sense that God is truly here for us. It will help us to realize once again the truth that God is slow to anger, rich in mercy, and abundant in his kindness to us who believe in him and who seek him as we do in this special time of Novena prayer.

I don't know if the poor truck driver who had to wear his meatloaf that evening instead of eating it was seeking revenge or if he was simply a lousy driver.

Whatever the case may be, one of the little details that caught my attention in that story was that what was supposed to be a quiet dinner, but had a surprise ending, began when that truck driver made the sign of the cross and said a prayer in front of a whole bunch of people.

With that, I encourage you to think about the words of consolation attributed to the Infant of Prague centuries ago. These words were intended for the Carmelites who were custodians of the original statue of the Infant of Prague, but they are also intended for us. Jesus said, “The more you honor me, the more I will bless you.”

I pray with you and for you that this Novena which has begun with the sign of the cross will continue with fervent prayer each day and that it will bring a surprise ending that is full of God’s love and mercy.