

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent – (Year B) – February 25, 2018

GN 22:1-2, 9A, 10-13, 15-18; PS 116: 10, 15, 16-17, 18-19; ROM 8:31B-34; MK 9:2-10

There's a verse from the **Book of Genesis** in our **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** today, that perfectly captures the **symbolism** and **timing** of our **blessing** and **placing** today of this new **altar Crucifix** here at the Cathedral.

But before looking at that verse, let's consider a couple of things about the **Crucifix itself**. Depending on how far away your pew is from the sanctuary, you may not be able to tell that **this Cross is carved** in the form of a **sword**.

That's no accident!

But...*why a sword?*

Because **spiritual warfare** is not just a **dramatic term** we use to make the Christian life sound more **interesting** and **exciting**. Spiritual warfare is a **hard reality**.

When we look around and see the **violence**, the **division**, the **terrorism**, the **rumblings of war**, the **destruction of the family**, the **devaluation of human life**, and the **lost innocence of our young people**, we must understand that these things—*as troubling as they are*—are mere **shadows** of a *much larger battle* raging **around** us...**above** us...and even *within* us.

The idea, for example, that Jesus engaged in **hand-to-hand combat with Satan** after the **Holy Spirit** drove him into the *desert* for **forty days** immediately following his **Baptism** in the Jordan River, is a **foreign concept** for many "*tender heart Catholics*" who prefer a **soft-featured, blue-eyed, feather-haired Jesus** who **frolics** among **flowers**, **kisses babies** and who tells **everyone** that **everything** they're doing is "**ok**"...*as long as they're not hurting anyone!*

This counterfeit Christianity is what **Notre Dame University Professor Christian Smith** refers to as "**Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**". According to Professor Smith, **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism** consists of beliefs like these:

- 1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.**

2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about [oneself].
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

<https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>

Let's consider that last one: “**Good people go to heaven when they die.**”

How many of you are *good* people?

How many of you are *holy*?

Folks, *holy people go to heaven*, because “**good**” is a **moving target** defined by humans, but “**holy**” is a **firm target** defined by **God**.

**Sappy sentimentalism** may **satisfy** our **self-esteem** in the **short-term**, but it won't **save a single soul** for *eternity*. Which is why a Crucifix like this one—which provides a *startling reminder of what's actually at stake in the spiritual life*—namely, the eternal destiny of each human soul—is so important.

Now, just as the *shape* of this particular Crucifix **focuses** us on the **reality** of spiritual **warfare**, so too does the *material* from which it's **made** focus us on the cause for that great **joy, courage** and **confidence** we can take from the **Readings** for **today's Mass** as we engage the *battle*.

This Crucifix is made of **wood**.

So, how, then, is the *wood* of this **Crucifix** connected to the **Scripture passages** for **today's Mass**?

We'll see it in *one particular verse* from **Genesis** in our **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** which—at first glance—may not seem too significant. Genesis tells us:

*When [Abraham and Isaac] came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.* (Gen 22:9)

Abraham put **wood** on the altar.

But the **second half of this verse** is critically important, even though it's *not* part of our **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** today:

*Next [Abraham] bound his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar.*  
(Gen 22:9)

Now the picture should be getting clearer.

Abraham puts **wood** on the **altar** and binds his **own beloved son** to the **wood**.

What is an **altar** for?

**Sacrifice!**

So, what do we have?

An **altar**...with a **beloved son**...fixed to the **wood** that has been placed on the altar...as a **sacrifice**...in obedience to **God's will**.

**Like an altar Crucifix!**

One of the reasons that we may not have noticed this connection right away is due to the **over-emphasis** these days on the Mass as a "*meal*" instead of a "**sacrifice**".

In the same way that "**nice**" **Jesus** is easier for a "**tender heart Catholic**" to handle than "**spiritual warrior**" **Jesus**...so too is a casual "**meal**" easier to **stomach** than a "**gut wrenching**" sacrifice. But *the Last Supper loses all its meaning if separated from the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus which came the next day.*

We'll pick up again on this theme shortly.

For now, we must recognize how an over-emphasis on *comfort* in the Christian life not only leaves us **utterly unprepared** for the **spiritual battle**. It also **deprives** us of the **confidence** needed to **engage the battle** because we pay little or no attention the "*strength that God provides*" (cf. 1 Pet 4:11) to win the victory over Satan and to enjoy the **spoils of this war**—*eternal life in heaven with God and our loved ones.*

So, instead of deliberately **turning a blind eye** to reality, let's **charge confidently** into the Scriptures to discover **why** we can face the battle that lies before us...*without fear!*

Our **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** today skips some important verses in **Genesis 22** from which the Reading is taken. Here are some of the **key skipped verses**:

*...Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide **himself the lamb** for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.* (Gen 22:6-8)

Let's pause here and consider a few things...

A **son**, with **wood** laid upon his **shoulders**, in the presence of his **father**, trudging up a **mountain** where a **sacrifice** is to be made...of *himself*.

Can you see it *yet*?

How about the **answer** Abraham gave Isaac when he asked his father **what** would be sacrificed? Listen very closely to **the way the response is worded**:

*"God will provide **himself the lamb** for a burnt offering..."* (Gen 22:8)

Notice he *doesn't* say, "**God...himself...will provide the lamb**".

He says, "God will provide **himself**—the *lamb*".

Can you see it *yet*?

Who is the **Lamb of God** who, **himself**, *is* the **sacrifice**?

Interestingly enough, "**tender heart Catholics**" have something in common with our **Protestant friends**. Both reject the idea of a sacrifice taking place on the altar, though the **reasons** for their objections are **very different**.

Whereas “tender heart Catholics” cringe at the *violence of sacrifice*, our Protestant friends have a more *biblical motivation* to resist...which comes from places **St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans**; **St. Peter’s 1<sup>st</sup> New Testament Letter**; and the **Letter to the Hebrews**. Speaking of Jesus’ self-sacrifice on the Cross, **St. Paul** writes:

*The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.*  
(Rom 6:10)

St. Peter writes:

*For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit...* (1 Pet 3:18)

And the author of Hebrews writes:

*...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* (Heb 10:10)

So, our “tender-heart Catholics” are afraid of **pain**, while our Protestants brothers and sisters are averse to **heresy**—an aversion *manifested* in the **misguided** idea that the **Catholic Mass** is somehow **re-crucifying** or **re-sacrificing** Christ in contradiction to the *clear Scriptural assertion* that Christ died “*once...for all*”.

But our Protestant friends apparently do not understand the *Jewish way of thinking* when it comes to **covenant sacrifice**. The sacrifice of the altar at the **Catholic Mass** represents the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. *Not*, however, in any **merely symbolic way**, but rather in the *Jewish way*—as in “**re-PRESENT-ing**”—that is, *making present again*—the *timeless* Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

The Sacrifice that occurs on the altar during the Catholic Mass **does not repeat**, but rather, *perpetuates* the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross **and gives us** the *fruit* of that 2,000 year old sacrifice...the Eucharist...**today!**

Here again, we will see why the **wood** of our new altar Crucifix is so important. What **began** as an **instrument** of gruesome torture—the **Cross**—was *converted* by **Jesus** into a **Tree of Life**, from which flow all the graces of the **Sacraments**, and most preeminently...the **Holy Eucharist**. The **Tree of Life** is a “**fruit tree**” and its fruit is the **Sacraments**.

Turning to the account of the **Transfiguration** in our **Gospel passage today** helps us see this. Let's focus on one particular verse in the immediate aftermath of the **dazzling appearance of Jesus with Moses and Elijah**.

*Suddenly, looking around, [Peter, James and John] no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.* (Mk 9:8)

This can be viewed as a **veiled reference** to the *Eucharist*.

After all, even though Jesus was *not transformed*—but rather “*unveiled*” in his **full glory** for his friends to witness—there's an important parallel between what happened on **that mountain** and what happens on the **altar** at every Catholic Mass.

During the Mass—in obedience to Jesus' command to his **Apostles** at the **Last Supper** to “*do this in memory of me*” (cf. Lk 22:19)—the bread is *transformed* into the **Body of Christ**. Whereas Jesus' *appearance* merely **intensified** at the **Transfiguration**, the **substance of the bread** is actually *transformed into the substance of his Body* at the **Consecration**. And, just as with the Apostles on the mountain, we likewise “*see no one (and nothing) but Jesus alone*” when we gaze upon him in the Holy Eucharist, elevated...not above a *mountain*...but above the **altar**.

Our new altar Crucifix—*which is both weapon and tree*—reminds us of the extent of the **Father's love** for us...and the extent of his **Son's commitment** to us. God not only gives us **courage** for the battle. He also **nourishes and strengthens** us to overcome the **Ancient Enemy**—just as Jesus did in the desert by skillfully employing **Sacred Scripture** in *combat*.

God said to **Abraham**, through his angel: “*I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.*” (Gen 22:12)

We likewise hear the Angel of God say to us: “*You know how devoted God is to you since he did not withhold from you his only beloved Son*”.

And we are reminded of the **immensity** and **intensity** of the love of Father and Son for us—every time we see **this crucifix**...on **this altar**...here at **the Cathedral**.