

Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 3:1-6

We usually associate the crooked being made straight and the rough ways being made smooth with sin. We look at the prophecy from the Book of Isaiah as a prefiguration of the Last Day, when the final and total purification of the world will take place. And this is not wrong. However, we may also interpret this passage that St. Luke quotes in terms of how it applies to the present, how the way of the Lord transforms the landscape even before Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead.

St. Edith Stein was born into an observant Jewish family in Breslau, Germany (Breslau was given to Poland after World War II), but by the time she was a teenager, she had become an atheist. She studied philosophy in college and had received her doctorate before she was twenty-six. Around the time she defended her dissertation, she went to meet the widow of a former colleague, who had been killed in World War I. As the meeting neared, she became very nervous. How could she face someone who had experienced such loss? But when she finally met the woman, St. Edith Stein was surprised by her peace. You see, her former colleague and his widow had become Christian before his death, and this meeting was the future saint's first encounter with the light of Christ. Less than five years later, she had become a Christian herself.

If you are familiar with the story of St. Edith Stein, you know that she died at Auschwitz during the Holocaust, murdered in retaliation for the Dutch bishops' standing up to their German occupiers and condemning Nazi anti-Semitism. Within a week of the bishops' joint statement, the German governor had rounded up nearly three hundred Catholics who were converts from Judaism, Catholics who had been left alone up to that point. St. Edith Stein and her sister, Rosa, were among the group dying in the gas chamber on August 9, 1972. They were nuns, taken right from the Carmelite convent at Echt, Holland, for deportation to the concentration camp.

The sisters who witnessed her arrest and even the Dutch officials who were collaborating with the Nazi regime noted her calm as she faced certain death. Her faith was so impressive that one man offered her a way of escape, but she insisted that she should be permitted to share in the suffering of her people. What was responsible for the remarkable transformation from the woman afraid even to meet a widow, to the saint whose countenance shone in the face of death?

We have all heard many stories of the saints who are at peace because of the forgiveness they have received in the Blood of the Cross, from the murderer St. Paul, to the fornicator St. Augustine, to the gambler St. Camillus de Lellis. But if we look at the life of St. Edith Stein, we see that she never lived a profligate life. She never was brought so low by her sin that she embraced the Cross as her way out. Though she was a sinner, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, it is not her sin that we associate with her life prior to conversion to the Catholic Faith. Yet for all her intellectual gifts, she knew she needed more.

What St. Edith Stein reveals in her own witness is that it is the cross that makes the crooked straight and the rough ways smooth. A willingness to bear the cross with Jesus and for Jesus is what paradoxically took away her fears, what made rough situations less than daunting, what made her capable of walking straight to her own crucifixion. What she discovered in the Cross was love. She had written her dissertation on empathy, but only in the light of faith, only in the love that is exemplified in Jesus' self-oblation, was she finally able to understand, to find the answers she'd been seeking all along. She offered her death as reparation for the unbelief of her people, praying fervently that the Jews would come to know that love is worth it. Love allows us to face sufferings in a state of peace.

A little while ago, I was talking to one of my nephews, who has been raised in the Church his whole life. I wasn't making excuses for myself, but instead was trying to explain that the sins of my youth occurred within the context of a weak moral foundation. Of all the people in the world, my nieces and nephews know how far short I fell of the glory of God, for they have their parents to tell them stories. What is hidden from the world is not hidden from them. So I told my nephew, "I wasn't Catholic then." His response was a great encouragement to me. He said, "That's what my mom tells me all the time." How blessed they are that from the time they were babies they've been told the difference between the light and the darkness, and most of the people they've known are those who desire to live in the light, even if it means giving their lives for it.

What the convert knows is that life is so much easier being in the light of the Cross. Life as a Catholic doesn't mean we won't face challenges, or that we won't be beset by temptations, or that fear won't occasionally rear its ugly head. Rather, the life of faith means we know how to deal with the challenges, the temptations, the fears. We have resources we didn't even know existed, when in our youth we stumbled about in the dark. But thanks be to God, like St. Edith Stein, we were rescued; and the crooked ways have been made straight, the rough ways made smooth.

So whether Jesus' love has turned a profligate sinner into a man striving for virtue, or He's given a scared little girl the courage to face death with composure, these transformations are a prefiguration of the glory yet to be revealed. How can we have faith that the mountains will be brought low and the valleys lifted up, that Isaiah's prophecy will be brought to its full fruition? We simply need look at those for whom the mountains have already been moved.