

Chrism Mass 2021 at St. Paul Cathedral 2021

Homily for the Chrism Mass 2020
Isaiah 61: 1-3, 6, 8-9; Revelation 1: 5-8; Luke 4:16-21

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! “Liberty to the captives!” We hear it every year. But that phrase certainly has resonance after the COVID-19 lockdown. We are all ready for that “jubilee year” proclaimed in our opening reading from the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah and embodied by Jesus himself in our Gospel from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke.

“Liberty to the captives!” Threaded throughout this jubilee proclamation is the question of suffering. Why? Why the captives? Why the blind? Why the indebted? Why the poverty? Why the oppression? Why?

In the 2014 movie “God’s not Dead,” Mark, a wealthy adult son, visits his mother who has severe dementia. “You prayed and believed,” he tells her. “Never done anything wrong. And here you are. You are the nicest person I know. I am the meanest. You have dementia. My life is perfect. Explain that to me.”

Moving out of her dementia fog Mark’s mother responds with what psychologists might term terminal lucidity: “Sometimes the devil allows a person to live a trouble-free life,” Mark’s mother tells her son, “because he doesn’t want them turning to God. His sin is like a jail cell except it’s so nice and comfy and there doesn’t seem there is any reason to leave. And the door is wide open until one day time runs out and the cell door slams shut and suddenly it’s too late.”



The insight here is a bit counterintuitive to the ways of the world. As we know from the Book of Job, when things go well, we intuitively believe God is with us. When things go poorly, we wonder why God has abandoned us. These are the kinds of lamentations we pray in the psalms.

Yet this brief exchange between Mark and his mother suggests that trouble-free lives of comfort may be of the devil whereas lives of struggle and challenge may be God's way of coaxing us out of ourselves and allowing us to grow. In English, Lent comes from the Old English root to lengthen, to grow. As the days grow longer and the shoots burst from flower bulbs and tree branches, so too do we grow forth as a direct result of the winter moments of our lives.

But if there is an insight from this movie "God is not Dead," there also is room to go much deeper. Mark hears from his mother that "...the cell door slams shut and suddenly it's too late." Then she forgets his name. But God, in Christ, never forgets us. Indeed, Christ even descended into hell. We pray this truth every Sunday in the Creed. He brought liberty to the captives – even in hell. There is not one corner of creation that escapes the salvific power of Christ's death on a cross, and His resurrection. Christ even went into hell to bring liberty to the captives, if their hearts were open.

The Mexican folkloric tradition of the Judas dancers draws on this powerful insight. Recall that on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week we always hear about Judas. On Holy Thursday Judas betrays Jesus and on Good Friday Jesus dies. Yet this is why the Judas dancers perform in so many of Mexico's Church plazas each Holy Week. Jesus descended into hell. It is as though even Judas could dance because Christ's death brought liberty to the captives – even in hell – if their hearts were open. He does the same for us in the "hells" we can create for ourselves.

Are our hearts open? That is the key question each of us must face. To what degree are our hearts open to Christ? I am keenly aware this has been a very hard year. More than one of you has spoken with me about parishioners who refuse to wear masks. More than one of you has encountered parishioners who become aggressive and difficult in the face of COVID-19 restrictions. More than one of you has faced people who believe you have crossed the line and taken away their constitutional rights to free worship. More than one of you has listened to people berate you and threaten legal action. More than one of you has wondered why you put up with what Moses himself would term in the Book of Exodus a "stiff necked" people who seem so enslaved to their opinions.

As priests we have the key to bring liberty to the captives. Much of the time responding to the difficult parishioners with reasoned logic does not work. Most of the time we have to listen to the reasons why they hold the beliefs they hold however illogical, unscientific or incorrect they may seem to us. We can bring liberty by listening. We do so, knowing that even when we listen to them with an open heart that reflects the very heart of Christ, they may still choose to remain in their well-padded and ideologically comfortable cells. We can open the door. We can offer a way out. But they must decide. This is precisely what Christ does at the gates of hell.

And it is never too late. It is never too late because we celebrate the Eucharist over and over again for our own salvation and the salvation of those we serve. We celebrate the sacraments over and over again constantly pointing to an open cell door unlocked by Christ himself in his descent into hell. We constantly offer liberty to the captives.

In a few moments as priests of the Diocese of Yakima you will renew your resolve "...to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God in the Holy Eucharist and the other liturgical rites and to discharge faithfully the sacred office of teaching, following Christ the Head and the Shepherd, not seeking any gain, but moved only by zeal of souls."

Thank you for all you are and all you give during this pandemic. Thank you for your faithful stewardship of the sacred mysteries of God. Thank you for patiently handling the difficult people who have been hard on you. Thank you for your faithfulness to the sacred office of teaching. During this lockdown, thank you for the many ways you seek to bring "liberty to the captives." Peace be with you.

Art: "Christ Descends into Hell," Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).