

3.28.2021 Palm Sunday

The traditional fairy tale Beauty and the Beast was originally published in 1756. This timeless story has been adapted for film, stage, and television and is loved by audiences of all ages throughout the world. Every new telling of this story may bring with it different names, faces, or details, but the events that always remain unchanged are those that are central to the theme of this great story, the miracle that takes place when that which is true and good and beautiful kisses a beast.

The Beast in this fairy tale was once a handsome young prince. A boy born into a royal family, created to be a king, but sadly, he rejected all that he was made to be, and instead the young prince chose a path that led him to be spoiled, selfish, and unkind. One cold, dark night, he was met at the door of his castle by a haggard old woman who was seeking shelter from the rain. When the prince refused to give this woman any assistance and turned her away, the image of the old woman melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress. The prince tried to apologize, but it was too late. The enchantress had seen the ugly depths of the young prince's heart and turned him into a hideous beast, an outward appearance that more accurately reflected the inner man. The prince would remain a beast for all time, unless, despite his ugliness, he could find true love. As the years passed he fell into despair and lost all hope. For who could ever love... a beast?

I would suggest, as uncomfortable as it may be, that we told our own version of this story today. Consider the way we began our service this morning. We sang a beautiful processional hymn. We held onto our Palm branches and welcomed our Messiah as He triumphantly entered Jerusalem, saying, *"Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest."* Then, just a few minutes later, during the reading of the Passion, the depth of the Fall of Mankind was revealed when joyful voices that sang out "All glory, laud, and honor, to thee Redeemer King" turned to shouts of *"Let Him be crucified!"*

This morning, humanity was perfectly cast to play the part of the prince who was turned into a beast, as sons and daughters who were born into *The Royal Family*, who were made in the image of the *King* of kings, chose to give up

that inheritance, and turned to *"the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things..."* (Mark 4:19). This is a difficult Sunday. I hate saying *"Let Him be crucified!"* I don't like how it reminds me that like Judas I have betrayed Him, like Peter I have denied Him, like Pilate I have washed my hands of Him, and like Barabbas I let Him suffer and die on a Cross that was made for me.

Psalm 53 states, *"God looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one"* (53:3-4). It seems the season of Lent has come along like an enchantress and brought to light that which was hidden in the dark recesses of our hearts. All too often this season of self-examination reveals qualities that look more like those of a beast than a handsome young prince.

Lent is a difficult season, and this is a difficult Sunday, yet unlike the prince who was turned into a beast, we don't despair or lose hope, because when we take an honest look in the mirror, when we stop deceiving ourselves and come to terms with our struggles and failures, what we recognize in this struggle is not as much who we are, as who we are not.

I've heard it said that if you're not running into Satan, you're probably running with him. Perhaps this season is meant to bring us into a face to face confrontation with our adversary, *"the father of lies"* (John 8:44), the one who opposes everything we know to be true. He is the enemy that we may struggle against every day, but we struggle with sin and the devil because, once again, that's who we are not. Joshua told the Israelites to *"Choose you this day whom ye will serve..."* (24:15), and isn't that the choice we're making every time the devil knocks us down in this broken world, and we get back up to fight another day. By the grace of God, in that moment we are choosing to be with our Lord, not against Him, to gather with Him, not to scatter, to walk on the right side of the road that leads to the kingdom of God, not to wander as a lukewarm, middle-of-the-road Christian. Also, when we feel convicted by our sins, by all that we struggle against, that's tangible evidence that God's Holy Spirit lives in us, that the God of Heaven and Earth speaks to us, not from some distant shore, but as One who dwells in us. As St. John writes, *"... greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world"* (1

John 4:4).

As you know, Beauty and the Beast ends with this beautiful girl falling in love with the hideous beast, and her love for him not only breaks the spell and reveals this handsome young prince, her love changes him completely. After she falls in love with him, after he's loved by that which is true and good and beautiful, the prince is no longer spoiled and selfish, instead, like love, he's *patient* and *kind* (1 Corinthians 13:4), and in this we see a reflection of a Divine truth that God has revealed to us. The truth that, like the beast, we are not loved because we've changed, we are changed because we are loved. "*We love, because He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19).

St. Paul tells us that "*God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). Christ died for the unrighteous, the ungodly, He died for sinners. In the context of this sermon, Christ died not for the beautiful, but for the beast, that He might make us beautiful. Another way to express that truth would be to consider words Jesus spoke to His disciples on the night He was betrayed. It was then that He said to them, "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down His life for His friends*" (John 15:13). As you consider His words, remember that Scripture describes our Savior as "*the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8). From God's perspective outside of time, Jesus laid down His life for His friends while we were still His enemies, that He might call us His friends.

Our Savior Christ died for the beast, to make us beautiful. He died for His enemies, that He might call us friends. He died for sinners, to make us saints. As we journey through Holy Week, may we constantly consider His infinite, sacrificial love, a love we couldn't earn and don't deserve, a love perfectly and painfully manifested in and through the Cross of Christ, a love that transforms every one of us from a hideous beast into a beautiful child of God.