

## Presentation of the Lord

Just to get this out of the way first, I'm predicting Chiefs win by 10. People ask, "Is it OK to pray for a sports victory?" I hope so because I often do. As they say at the University of Notre Dame, Jesus does not have a favorite football team, but his mother does. I'm reminded of the prayer that Captain Jack Hayes offered before the Battle of Monterrey in 1846: "O Lord, we are about to join battle with vastly superior numbers of enemy, and, Heavenly Father, we would like you to be on our side and help us; but if you can't do it, for Christ's sake don't go over to them; but lay low, keep dark, and you'll see the [dangedest] fight you ever saw in all your born days." If God does not share my enthusiasm for the Chiefs, I pray that he not favor the prayers of the 49ers either. Just sit back and enjoy the game.

I watch a lot of baseball in the summer because it is so different from everything else I do that it lets me get excited about something that doesn't really matter in the end and then return afresh to things that do matter. The contest of sport is a microcosm of our lifelong contest between good and evil. Just as a fine team can fall behind early in a game, so we may be inattentive to our good judgments, causing stress among the people who depend on us. Sometimes our good judgment is tested. Our lack of attention leads to sin and death.

The Letter to the Hebrews points out that the opponent of our lives is not a mere sports team, but "the one who has the power of death, that is, the Devil." Jesus came "in blood and flesh," like children, in order to "free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life.... Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested."

On the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord we remember the day when Jesus entered the Temple as a child of flesh and blood, and his parents heard this prophecy: "this child is destined for the fall and rise of many." Not the rise and fall, but the fall and rise - sin and forgiveness, dying and rising. From his infancy he carried the mystery of cross and resurrection.

God could have saved the world in some other way, but we believe that the Word became flesh so that human flesh could become like the divine Word. God not only created humans and loved humans, God became human and underwent all the suffering that humans undergo, even death. The resurrection conquers all that the devil has to throw against us. God is not impartial in that struggle.

This is one reason why we find sports inviting and victory intoxicating. Victory brings us the reward of struggle through the teamwork of shared humanity; through victory we taste resurrection. Victories do more than give hope; they provide moments of celebration that life is good, that the gift of life outshines our daily sufferings.

If you suffer from repeated sin or fears of death, remember today's message. Christ came among us as a child of hope and wonder, ready to face the future and to help us do the same. The conflicts of life are not ends in themselves; they are the means to something greater, something that in Christ we can conquer. In things that really matter, God hears our prayers for victory.

Sunday, February 2, 2020