

For the last couple of weeks, I have been drawn in by the Winter Olympics. A few times, it has been hard to pull away from the TV, as someone is competing for gold. And I've been wondering what it is that makes these two weeks so interesting every four years. Maybe it's the amount of snow and ice, which are so foreign to us here. Maybe it's the competition and the patriotism of cheering for the USA. Maybe it's just that there's not much else to watch because football season is over. But some of the things that are most intriguing to me are the stories of the athletes who spend their whole lives preparing to compete in their sports. They dedicate themselves completely to being perfectly prepared for what they know is coming.

Lent is for us a time of spiritual preparation. In one aspect, Lent is a time that we prepare ourselves to run the race of the Christian life. The disciplines of Lent help us to remain focused on the Lord, to remain faithful to the path of holiness that He has laid out for us.

But Lent is also a time in which the Lord is preparing us. Every year Lent ends in the same way - Lent ends with the Cross. And throughout the season of Lent, the Lord is preparing us for the Cross. He is preparing our hearts for Good Friday, when we will remember once again that Jesus gave His life for us to save us from our sins. Lent prepares us for the Cross.

This is what is happening in the readings today - The Lord is preparing us, and indeed preparing all people throughout the ages, for the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

We see this first in the reading from Genesis. God calls on Abraham to offer a sacrifice to him. But it is not just an ordinary sacrifice for which God asks; He asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Remember now, that this is the son that was promised to Abraham by God, the son that was born only after many years of childlessness, the son from whom a great nation was to spring forth. So why on earth why God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? Scripture tells us that God was putting Abraham to the test. But even this seems like the action of a cruel god, until we look closer at the story. There are a few details that should sound very familiar.

First, God called Abraham to go to the heights of Moriah. Jewish tradition holds that this is the same mountain on which the city of Jerusalem was later built. Then, as Abraham and Isaac made their way up the mountain to the place of sacrifice, Isaac was made to carry the wood upon which the sacrifice would be offered. Finally, when the angel came and stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, they found instead a lamb which had been caught by its horns in a thicket, a thorn bush.

Each of these little details point forward to another sacrifice offered on top of that mountain in Jerusalem - the mount of Calvary. There the Lamb of God was crowned with thorns around His Sacred Head. There the only Son of God carried the wood of the cross upon which He would be sacrificed. There Jesus offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice to the Father for our sake and to redeem us from our sins.

God's request of Abraham was not only a test of his faith, but also a living prophesy of the one true sacrifice offered for all. In the sacrifice of Abraham, God prepared all people to recognize the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross.

And in the Gospel, too, we see the Lord preparing His people for the coming sacrifice of the Cross. In the Transfiguration of Jesus upon Mount Tabor, Jesus revealed His glory to Peter, James, and John. In the Transfiguration of Jesus, the veil was lifted that normally hides the power and the beauty of His divinity. Jesus allowed those three closest disciples to see Him in His glory. He allowed them to hear the voice of the Father from heaven: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him."

Some of the Fathers of the Church teach that the reason for this revelation to the three apostles was to strengthen them, to prepare them for what was soon to come. Soon they would witness Jesus being arrested and beaten. Soon they would see Jesus carry the Cross and be nailed to it. Soon they would watch Him die. In those moments, they could draw strength and faith from their witness of the Transfiguration. In those moments they could remember the power and glory of Jesus that they had experienced on the mountain.

As we journey through Lent and draw near to Holy Week, the Lord is preparing us too for our remembrance of the Cross. Hopefully in these first couple of weeks of Lent we have begun to see God working in our lives. Hopefully our prayer and fasting and almsgiving are helping us to grow in our love for God and our love for neighbor. Hopefully, we are drawing nearer to Christ through the sacraments, especially the sacraments of reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. In all these spiritual practices, we open our hearts to the grace of Almighty God. And by this grace, the Lord prepares us. He prepares us for the remembrance that will come once again at Good Friday, and He prepares us to follow Christ with faithfulness and holiness.

As we draw near to the altar of the Lord in this Holy Mass, let us ask for his grace to see the glory of Jesus in the Eucharist. May our hearts be filled with faith in Jesus Christ so that we may be ready to walk with Him the Way of the Cross and stand by Him as He offers Himself for us.