

“Birth to Glory”
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Abbey
Acts 18:9-18; John 16:20-23

I have one sister. Her name is Lisa, but I still call her Wees Wees, because Lisa was just too hard to pronounce when I was a toddler. To this day, she remains my favorite sister. She called me this morning with the joyful news that she gave birth yesterday to her second child, a beautiful girl named Grace Olivia. Naturally, I was quite thrilled, because Grace Olivia’s emergence from the womb into the world of light means that Monk Thomas has a baptism to perform this summer. More importantly, however, I was immensely grateful to my sister for providing me with the inspiration for tonight’s homily that had been lacking as of this morning!

A different mother, with five children and many grandchildren, once told me that she regards the anguish of birth as the closest a human being can come to experiencing Christ’s agony on the cross. Now Thomas might be my name, but I’m not going to doubt her! In fact, I’m perfectly willing to believe her, mainly because Jesus himself agrees with her! Recall the words of our Lord pronounced just moments ago, words drawn from the divine well of John’s Gospel: “When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world.”

The placement of this passage within John’s Gospel is essential to note if we wish to understand properly Jesus’ point. When he utters these words about a mother and the birth of her child, Jesus is in the midst of the Last Supper with his twelve apostles- just hours before his passion and death. In the course of the Last Supper, Jesus foretells his own trial and their coming sorrow, but he also prepares them for what follows- the joy of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus has been aware of this impending suffering from the first chapters of the Gospel- in fact, “the hour” appears frequently in John to foreshadow the agony that awaits Jesus on the cross. At the wedding feast of Cana in chapter 2, Jesus tells his mother “My hour has not yet come” when she expects him to reveal his glory by turning water into wine (she simply tells him “They have no wine” [eyebrow raised]- a maternal guilt-trip if there ever was one!). The Jewish

authorities are unable to arrest him in chapters 7 and 8 because “his hour had not yet come.” Jesus recognizes in chapter 12 that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” and at the beginning of the Last Supper scene, John writes that “Jesus knew his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father” (13:1). Just after speaking of the painful hour of a woman in labor, Jesus addresses the Father with these words: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you” (17:1).

All of these references to Jesus’ hour direct us to his sacrificial death on the cross, the ultimate act of selfless love. Equally essential to John’s insistence on the hour of Jesus, though, is the assertion that the passion and death of Jesus are the means by which His glory is revealed to the world. With this awareness of suffering leading to glory, of death leading to victory over death, we can return to Jesus’ words about the woman enduring the pangs of childbirth. By speaking of the woman’s “hour,” Jesus is explicitly linking this maternal suffering to his own passion and crucifixion. All mothers, therefore, have a beautiful firsthand insight into the mystery of Christ’s life-giving sacrifice that no priest can possibly have. For just as blood and water flowed from the pierced side of our Lord on Good Friday, so too does the excruciating anguish of delivery bring forth life out of a mother’s body.

But Jesus does not limit the analogy between child bearing and his own crucifixion to pain. He presses the comparison to identify the same result at work in both cases: just as the death of Jesus makes possible the resurrection, so too the woman’s labor yields the precious gift of a freshly stamped image of God, a new life. And so great is the sublime *delight* the woman experiences upon holding her child for the first time, Jesus declares, that she no longer remembers the earlier pain at all- an observation corroborated by our scientific understanding of hormones that maximize the mother’s joy as she gazes upon her child and block the painful trauma of the delivery.

This Gospel passage obviously makes for great Mother’s Day homily material (friendly reminder: Mother’s Day is this Sunday). But for those of us who are not mothers and not even married, the “hour” of Jesus offers a wonderful starting point for meditation on the privileged demands of the Christian life. In a very real sense, all of the New Testament books, from the Gospels to the letters of St. Paul to the book of Revelation, are exhortations written to fortify believers in their good fight of faith. In the face of unknown agonies and unexpected pains we cannot control, we must not think that suffering is somehow an unfashionable sign of weakness,

but rather that, to use the words of Paul to the spirited but weak-willed Corinthians, “this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

Everyone has a different momentary affliction which can sanctify them if they choose to see it as such, a unique cross tailored to their shoulders should they accept its burden, a distinctive hour when they will be summoned to suffer without their willing consent. At this hour of our lives, may we pray for courage, that under-invoked virtue so fearlessly manifested by the apostles and early martyrs, that the hour for us will be a period of graced time of glory, in which the light of Christ’s victory bursts the gloomy clouds and scatters all darkness from our firm but feeble hearts.