

Christmas 2019 “Light Triumphs over Darkness”

Fr. Frank Schuster

How shall I begin? How about this...A long time ago and in a manger far, far away! I love it when I can start a homily that way. Any of you see the latest Star Wars? I grew up with the franchise so of course I saw it opening night. And don't worry, this will be a spoiler free homily. Having said that, all the Star Wars films have the same plot, don't they? They all try to tell a story of light conquering darkness and good triumphing over evil however the writers define those terms. However, the real reason I am glad a new Star Wars film came out is because I get to talk about my favorite character again in the whole series. Remember who my favorite character is? Drum roll please, Obi Won Kenobi! You might recall that the reason for this isn't because of the character in the movies per se but rather because of the actor who played him Sir Alec Guinness.

You see, just like when the Hobbit or Lord of the Ring movies offered me the opportunity to talk about J.R.R. Tolkien and what an amazing Catholic he was and the Catholic themes at work in his books, when a Star Wars film comes around, I get to talk about Sir Alec Guinness who converted to Catholicism when he was 42. It is a story well worth remembering. To begin with, Alec Guinness was born in poverty and never knew his father. He was a seeker though, and tried his hand at a number of faiths such as Anglicanism, Buddhism, the Quakers, and perhaps the most controversial of all, Presbyterianism (Just a joke, don't write letters). It was the horrors of World War II though that moved his heart to become even more faithful as a Christian. This is interesting to me because World War II was a really dark time, and yet, everything about the war moved Alec Guinness closer to Jesus. My take on it? There is something about the dark side of this world that can motivate the heart to seek the light of Christ. In fact, if you stop and think about it, that is what Christmas is all about. Christmas is about light triumphing over darkness.

It is interesting though, that when Guinness turned 40, something remarkable happened that moved his heart to Catholicism. He was working on a film entitled Father Brown, which is of course based on G.K. Chesterton's famous stories about a crime-solving priest. He was walking down a street in his costume for the movie and a child mistook him as a real life priest, and this touched his heart and made him really think about the character he was playing and the faith he represented. What happened next: his son Matthew came down with Polio and became very sick. Polio is a horrible disease. As a result, Alec found himself spending a lot of time at a local Catholic Church to pray for his son. Again, there was something about the darkness in life that motivated Alec to grow closer to Jesus. I think this is a witness for all of us to consider. I also find it interesting that Alec's conversion to Catholicism wasn't really about the example of a pope or priest really, something I find refreshing. Alec's conversion to Catholicism happened when he was praying for his son on his knees in a church. Through his tears, Alec prayed that if his son Matthew was healed that he would become a Catholic. Well, guess what, the Lord answered and his son miraculously recovered against all odds. True to his word, Guinness, his wife and son all became Catholic, and I got a Christmas homily as a result.

I share this story again about Sir Alec Guinness because, although he is known worldwide as the actor who originally played the famous Jedi Master Obi Won Kenobi who fought the dark side, the truth is, Alec fought the battle of light versus darkness in his own life, not with a sword but with faith, not with power but with prayer, during some of the darkest years of the twentieth century and through times of real hardship in his family. Alec's Catholic faith helped him stare down that darkness with hope, love, and simple acts of kindness. We can too.

[Vigil Mass] Our scripture readings this evening play with these themes. How does our first reading begin? Isaiah says, "For Zion's sake I will not be silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her vindication shines forth like the dawn and her victory like a burning torch." See it? Light triumphs over darkness. The Gospel reading from Matthew is the same we had last weekend, and so you may recall that for me, it is a moving reminder again that the first Christmas wasn't easy. The first Christmas was kind of dark and almost started out in disaster. It took the intervention of an angel before Joseph could embrace his role as the hero he was, becoming a heroic husband to Mary and stepfather to Jesus. It is a story that underscores that, even though life can become dark at times, in our world or in our relationships, light will triumph over darkness if we walk by the light of faith like Joseph.

[Midnight Mass] And we can see these themes at work in our scripture readings tonight. How does our first reading begin? Isaiah says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone." See it? Light triumphs over darkness. The Gospel Reading from Luke this evening tells of the adventure of Joseph and Mary travelling to Bethlehem. Mary goes into labor and there is no room at the inn. And so, in the middle of the night they had to settle for essentially a stable where animals slept. And once Jesus is born and placed in a manger, angels appeared illuminating the night giving glory to God in the highest. It is a story of heroic people overcoming adversity and light triumphing over darkness. And, as an aside, the manger is a fascinating symbol in this Gospel reading because a manger is essentially a trough an animal would eat from. That Jesus would be placed in a manger is a radical statement that foreshadows Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist. Something to think about.

[Mass at Dawn] And we can see these themes at work in our scripture readings this morning. What was our response for the responsorial psalm? Our response was, "A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us". The psalmists then says, "Light dawns for the just; and gladness, for the upright of heart. Be glad in the LORD, you just, and give thanks to his holy name." See it? Light triumphs over darkness. The Gospel reading is a continuation of last night's Gospel. Joseph is trying to find shelter for Mary who was in labor and the local inn turns them away. They had to settle for a stable where animals slept. However, after Jesus was born, angels brightened the night sky giving glory to God and telling the shepherds where to find Jesus. They go and seek Jesus and find him with Mary and Joseph. Their response was the same as the angels, they gave glory to God. It is a story of heroic people triumphing over adversity and light triumphing over darkness.

[Mass During the Day] And we can see these themes at work in our scripture readings today, can't we? Our Gospel reading from St. John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." See it? The incarnation and everything about Christmas is a story of light triumphing over darkness.

And so, what does this all of this mean for us this Christmas? My friends, we all have a battle within us of light wrestling with darkness don't we? Whether is the anxiety we are feeling with what is going on in our relationships at home, at work, or in our country right now, or times when we feel serious grief like the loss of a loved one, or the loss of our health, or the loss of a job, or the loss of direction; yes, we all struggle with darkness at times. However, the message on Christmas is this: Jesus is the light of the world. Give yourself to him. Rebuke the darkness. Don't let it win. On Christmas, God has given us his everything in the Christ child. Can we in exchange give Jesus our everything? Can we give Jesus our relationships, our worries and our memories, the good ones, the bad ones, the joyful ones, and even the dark ones? If we do this, no matter where our life is right now, we may discover something wonderful like Alec Guinness and others have. We may discover that even in the most difficult times we find ourselves, light will triumph over darkness when we remain close to Jesus who is the light of the world.