

Wednesday of the 5th Week of Lent

Homily of Bishop Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

March 24, 2021

On this Wednesday of the 5th Week of Lent, the Church presents us the third chapter of the Book of the Prophet Daniel.

This passage contains one of the most memorable and inspirational images of the entire Old Testament, the image of four holy men – Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and a fourth man “who likes like a son of God” giving praise and thanksgiving to God as they walk in a white hot furnace.

They are bound and cast into this white hot furnace for refusing to serve and worship the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar.

King Nebuchadnezzar is in shock when he sees these virtuous men walking in the fire unharmed and says: “I see four men unfettered and unhurt, walking in the fire, and the fourth looks like a son of God...Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent his angel to deliver the servants who trusted in him: they disobeyed the royal command and yielded their bodies rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.”

The steadfast witness to the True God of the four holy men has an impact on the King who moves from worshiping an idol to recognizing the true God.

Catholic biblical Scholars John Bergsma and Brant Pitre analyze this powerful Old Testament story. They write: “Here again, we witness a conflict between systems of worship. The three young men will not participate in the pagan cult of Babylon. Instead, they are willing to offer their own bodies to the Lord as a sacrifice to him.”¹

Bergsma and Pitre also comment on the Prayer of Praise that comes later in the chapter: “Seeing that the Lord is preserving them from the flame, the three young men also sing a splendid litany of praise in which they call upon every facet of

¹ John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 881.

creation, both visible and invisible, from the cherubim in the heavenly temple to the beasts and cattle and to the spirits and souls of the righteous who have died, to ‘bless the Lord’ and praise and exalt him forever.”²

The Hymn of Praise, Thanksgiving and Sacrifice of the four men walking in the fire of the furnace is grounded in their love for truth.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 8, Jesus says: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

In a paraphrase of these words of St. John’s Gospel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew the truth and the truth set them free and they inspire us to this day.

We know from our own experience of life, that witnessing to the truth in a spirit of humility, courage, mercy and charity often requires us to walk through white hot furnaces of opposition and humiliation.

These great Old Testament figures and the Gospel of John teach us this morning that that witness to truth, despite the opposition and persecution described in the Beatitudes, always sets us free.

² Bergsma and Pitre, 881.