

1 Lent C

February 21, 2010

Cathedral

5:00 and 10:00

Theme: Christ Jesus is our “Invictus”—the undefeated One—in his struggle with the Evil One, and unites us in our common struggle and hope for victory.

The Gospel ends like this: “...**the devil finished every temptation.**”

Every temptation. And Jesus—fully one with us in all things but sin—*this* Jesus was “Invictus,” that is, from Latin, invincible, the undefeated one.

Earlier this month, the 11th of February marked the 20th anniversary that Nelson Mandela was released from prison in South Africa. For 27 years he languished in prison because of his aggressive opposition to apartheid in South Africa, in which the black majority was held at bay by the white minority. Twenty-seven years wasted behind bars, with the chance of anger and hatred to eat away at his soul.

After his release, four years later, Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994. He faced formidable problems—such as crime and rampant unemployment. It’s February, Black History month, and the movie “Invictus,” starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon, looks at a slice of South Africa’s story at that time. It centers around the national rugby team in that nation, called the “Springboks.” The team then—all white save a lone black player—symbolized white supremacy. Blacks in South Africa had nothing to do with the team; in prison, Mandela wanted the Springboks to lose. When he became president, however, Mandela knew that the world cup finals for rugby would be held in 1995 in South Africa. Now I know nothing of rugby, yet I was fascinated with the story. It’s really about bringing a nation together. Mandela went against his family and fellow blacks. He refused to let anger for all those years in prison defeat him. Instead, he took the lead and joined himself with the captain of the team, the white Francois Pienaar. He learned the names of the players on the team, and supported them. The Springboks had a sub-par record; they were mediocre at best. Mandela and Pienaar instilled a pride in the team. Underdogs, they struggled through each of the brackets in the rugby world

cup—winning. In the process, blacks and whites in the nation came together: united. In the finals, against a fierce New Zealand team—clear favorites they were—the Springboks won in overtime. The entire country of South Africa erupted in celebration. The nation was “Invictus”—invincible, undefeated: Mandela was right, and going beyond his long-seething aversion to the Springboks, he united blacks and whites.

We start off our Lent. And during these forty days the church offers us its finest stories of salvation. And it begins by telling us the story of Jesus’ testing by the Evil One—“*every* temptation” he faced. And he won, “Invictus,” undefeated! And the church cajoles us to keep our focus on him, the crucified Jesus, now Risen. At times we might feel that we have a sub-par record, less than mediocre, when it comes to withstanding temptation in our lives. Sisters and brothers: we keep our focus on Jesus, and by his grace we are united, and in him we gain strength to overcome evil. Like with the Springboks who trained constantly for the world cup which they won; like Olympic athletes who perform now, but who have trained tirelessly with the goal of victory spurring them on: yes, in these forty days we’re to train with greater intensity to go against evil within ourselves and in the world. We are to fast; we are to pray more deeply from the heart; we are to do justice and share our resources with those who have less.

It’s a struggle. It was for Jesus those forty days in the wilderness. As St. Augustine preached 1500 years ago about this Gospel, “See yourself as tempted in Jesus, and see yourself as victorious in him.” (1) Indeed, Christ Jesus is “Invictus,” the invincible One. In our training and in the midst of our temptations, we keep our focus on him, in order to share in his victory.

(1) From a commentary on the psalms by St. Augustine (Ps. 60,2-3; CCL 39, 766.