

One of the privileges I have as a priest is to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with people. And having gone to confession myself since my childhood, and being with people now as a priest as they make things right with God, one thing I can assure you of (in case you don't already know) is that God's grace is so amazing. A person comes to confession and acknowledges they made a mistake. But they also pray during the act of contrition to strive to become a better person by avoiding the near occasion of sin in the future. Of course a person will sin again; we all do. But by going to confession, a person is acknowledging that they made a mistake, and want to become a better person. And there are so many stories of people who after they own up to what they did, allow to happen what we hear about in our first reading, where God's messenger comes like the refining fire which refines the metal into silver and the fuller's lye, the fuller being the cleaner of soiled cloths that make them return to white. All of this though requires an openness to grace, but also a setting about to become a better person.

A week ago, the world lost one of the greatest basketball players of all time, Kobe Bryant, when his helicopter went down killing all on board. He boarded that helicopter, which he used as a way to cut down time in traffic allowing for more time to be spent as a family, after attending the early morning 7 a.m. Mass at Our Lady Queen of Angels church in Newport Beach. Mass though wasn't a rare thing in his life.

One of the tributes that came in about him was from singer Cristina Ballesterro, who talked about encountering him at a weekday mass at Holy Family Cathedral in Orange, California. They went up to communion, and he waited for her as a sign of respect. She said his most inspiring trait was his decision to turn to his faith in God and receive God's mercy and to be a better man after a "regretful decision."

That regretful decision was in 2003 when he was arrested for allegedly raping a woman in a hotel room in Colorado. The case never did make it to trial; it ended when he settled with a civil lawsuit and issued a public apology to her acknowledging that she did not consider the encounter to be consensual.

He denied the crime, but he did admit to marital infidelity. And there were consequences. He and his wife struggled to hold their marriage together. She suffered a miscarriage, which Kobe blamed himself for. When his wife had enough later that year, she threw all of his clothes out on the street. It was a game day, and hours later he played the worst first half of his basketball career against the Magic, scoring just a single point.

But, what happened at halftime was what some called the game when he became what would be his nickname, the black mamba. He reflected "I may never come back from this, but the only thing I can control right now is what I do on the basketball court."

Tracy McGrady of the Magic was defending him that night. And he recalls Mamba came out with a vengeance. He scored 37 points in the second half to lead his team to victory. But it was about more than basketball. He was beginning to understand he had to adopt an entirely different approach to his life and the game of basketball, namely the Mamba

Mentality. As he put it, the “mindset isn’t about seeking a result - it’s more about the process of getting to that result.”

It was reflective of something internally that was going on. In a 2015 interview with GQ, reflecting on this time earlier in his life, he said: “The one thing that really helped me during that process—I’m Catholic, I grew up Catholic, my kids are Catholic—was talking to a priest. It was actually kind of funny: He looks at me and says, ‘Did you do it?’ And I say, ‘Of course not.’ Then he asks, ‘Do you have a good lawyer?’ And I’m like, ‘Uh, yeah, he’s phenomenal.’ So then he just said, ‘Let it go. Move on. God’s not going to give you anything you can’t handle, and it’s in his hands now. This is something you can’t control. So let it go.’ And that was the turning point.

He needed grace and that mentality to persevere through trials. He lost the NBA Finals to his former teammate, Shaquille O’Neil, and Phil Jackson who had left the Lakers to go to the Heat. and failed to lead a younger Lakers team to the playoffs the following season. He’d swallow his pride and welcome Phil Jackson back to the Lakers, and they’d go on titles in 2009 and 2010.

But off the court, he applied that mentality to get done what needed to get done. He and his wife almost suffered a divorce, but worked on their marriage and reconciled in 2013. The couple, who had two children, went on to add two more to their family.

He regularly attended Mass with his family at his parish. And he connected his Catholic faith to a family commitment to help the poor, through the Kobe & Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation. The foundation helped fund youth homeless shelters and other projects aimed at serving the poor. In his words: “You have to do something that carries a little bit more weight to it, a little more significance, a little more purpose to it...Homelessness “is one that kind of gets pushed on the back burner because it’s easy to point the blame at those who are homeless and say, ‘Well, you made that bad decision. This is where you are. It’s your fault...In life, we all make mistakes and to stand back and allow someone to live that way and kind of wash your hands of it ... that’s not right,” he said. And so he did what he could to help the homeless, saying when people would say “help me, I want to turn my life around” his response would be “well, that’s why I’m here.”

And he strived to do that in his own life too, working on his marriage saying “..you know, my reputation as an athlete is that I’m extremely determined, and that I will work my (tail) off. How could I do that in my professional life if I wasn’t like that in my personal life, when it affects my kids? It wouldn’t make any sense.” He also resolved his multi-year feud with Shaquille O’Neal before he died, realizing it wasn’t worth it to stay angry as the two reconciled with Shaq giving a powerful tribute to him on TNT last week talking about his devastation and that Kobe was his little brother.

Indeed, it would seem by all accounts that he strived to work hard on and off the court, becoming a better man by responding to the grace of God, becoming a better man. Applying the “Mamba Mentality” to his life - seeing who he wanted to become, and

knowing with God's help, he could take control of the situation in front him through responding to grace.

As we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, we celebrate the return of the glory of the Lord to the Temple; the light of God coming as a helpless baby in his mother's arms. But it's much more than some sentimental scene. God's glory had years ago left the Temple due to people's sin; now that glory returns but it requires a response as well. Who will endure the day of his coming? The answer is people who have taken the steps to change. This is what is meant by the refiners fire and the fuller's lye. The silver and gold is refined; the fuller was someone from biblical times who used a harsh soap or lye to remove all the dirt from the cloth. Jesus has that job for us.

I never met Kobe Bryant. I just watched him play like millions of basketball fans. But in the story of his spiritual journey, it's clear that when he went to talk to his priest, when he went to Mass, he was going to the Lord to be purified. Jesus purges from us all that keeps us from being who it is we want to be. It goes back to what I said a few weeks ago in my homily, just OK is not OK. So what is it in us that needs refining? What is it that we battle? Lust, sins of the flesh, drinking too much, being a gossip, refusing to forgive others, anger and wrath leading to a short fuse, holding grudges and resentment, being envious, being greedy, taking advantage of others? Whatever it is, there are things we battle, things that might not individually make us criminals or even be mortal sins, but things we can so easily ignore, or just say aren't that big of a deal. Kobe could have continued the fame, and continued down the road of making bad decisions and still probably had his career and his money. But he saw something more valuable than the Larry O'Brien trophy and ring that went along with it, and that was trying to become a better man. So as we encounter Jesus momentarily at Holy Communion and go through the week, it's worth asking ourselves daily as we make an examination of conscience what in our life might need refining. It's so easy to become complacent because often once we are adults there's no one telling us what we're doing wrong, and it can be easy to dull our conscience and say hey it's just every so often, it's just because of a bad day, it's just me and my computer no one gets hurt, etc. Now is the time to own up to our sins so we can be refined by God's love for that day we stand before Him in His Temple. And it also means keeping it up, not just finding religion briefly, but doing what Anna and Simeon do, continually living a life of prayer and patient waiting.

And lastly, as we are refined, how are we going to respond to the love that God gives us by continually growing in it? We carry the light of Christ from this Temple into the world, into our homes, and into our workplaces. Bryant worked hard off the court trying to make the world a better place through his foundation, and through his work on helping kids and youth learn basketball. So how can we carry that light into our world is a question we should always ask as well. Jesus expects much of us, not just punching a clock.

In November of 2015, Kobe Bryant published his poem "Dear Basketball," which subsequently went on to become an animated short that won an Academy Award. In

that poem, which reflects on a boy falling in love with a game but having to let it go as he ages, he writes “my body knows it’s time to say goodbye; and that’s OK; I’m ready to let you go, I want you to know how so we both can savor every moment we have left together, the good and the bad we have given each other all that we have.” It’s a touching film, but it also reminds me of how in our lives, things change that we do have to let go of. Sometimes we are forced into change because of aging like Kobe and the game of basketball; but other times like Saint Paul who said when he was a child he thought as a child but then grew older and and became a man and put the ways of childhood behind him, we mature and grow and are refined, because we see greater things to love. Basketball obviously meant so much to Bryant, but far more important was learning how to become a better man, which he did by letting the light of Christ shine on his soul, and asking for God’s mercy to help him become the person he wanted to become.

I’ll end by quoting Fr. David Goodill, a Dominican Priest, who said in preaching on the Presentation: “Our past can burden us; mistakes made, hurts suffered. But the past (and for that matter the future) can only truly burden us if we judge our lives by human standards. The hope offered us in Jesus Christ transforms us, so that no matter how life has been hope is not lost, a hope which rest not upon our own efforts, but upon the loving friendship revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This is what Simeon and Anna proclaim: in this child God comes to save us by making us His friends. This is not to say that the emotional hurt of the past goes away, but it is to give us an assurance at the deepest level of our being that no matter how life has turned out, God presents us with a gift which goes beyond all human measure: His Only Son.” As Mr. Bryant now sees Jesus face to face, and God’s love removes anything left in him that he needed help with, may we move forward not shamed of our own past, and not ignoring the dark parts of the present, but truly encountering our Lord who will we hold in our hands in Holy Communion, being transformed by the incredible love of Jesus.