

## **Kobe Bryant & Responding to Mercy and Grace**

Last Sunday the world was shocked to learn of the sudden passing of Kobe Bryant who died with his daughter and several other passengers in a helicopter crash just outside of Los Angeles.

As a fan of the NBA, I've seen countless games over the years with Kobe doing his thing on the court, often against the Timberwolves who just could never seem to get past them in the playoffs. He was the kind of athlete who could just take over a game; a fierce competitor like Jordan, Bird, and the all time greats of the game who was a joy to watch, for when you saw Kobe play, you saw excellence.

As you know by now, ever time I preach, try to find stories to incorporate into my homily as a sort of springboard to the points I want to make. And in 2016 as I was getting ready for the Easter homily, somehow my search engine brought me to a story on Kobe Bryant. The story was on how he was formed and saved by his Catholic faith.

Born in Philadelphia, Kobe was raised in a Catholic household, and even spent time as a youth in Italy. He had a Catholic wedding at Saint Edward Roman Catholic Church in Dana Point, California.

It was in 2003 that he made a big mistake. He was accused of raping a woman in his hotel room while in Colorado for knee surgery. He did admit to being intimate with the woman, but denied rape. The charges were dropped by a judge, but the woman in question did file a civil suit against Bryant that was settled out of court.

When this happened, he issued a public apology, said he was ashamed of what he had done, but there were still consequences. Many sponsors left him. His wife nearly did too, but they were able to reconcile. But it was also at this time that he visited a priest.

In Kobe's words (taken from the article):

"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."

But while Kobe experienced mercy from God, he also responded to it. He and Vanessa went on to found the Kobe and Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation, which is dedicated to helping young people in need, and encouraging the development of physical and social skills through sports and assisting the homeless. When he was asked about it in 2013 as his career was coming to an end, he talked about wanting to be something more than a basketball player. In his words:

“My career is winding down. At the end of my career, I don’t want to look back and just say, “Well, I had a successful career because I won so many championships and scored so many points.” There’s something else that you have to do with that. [The homelessness] issue 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.”

In these words, Bryant sums up what the virtue of hope is all about; namely taking the love that God gives us, and building up the good in this world, and leaving it a better place than it was when we came into it; being the messenger that we hear about in our first readings from this week on the feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

From his life, we can be reminded of two important things.

The first is to listen to the words of his priest, that our sins and struggles are in God’s hands, and we can let go of things to him. Bryant, like all of us, is a sinner, but he also had the fortitude to own up to his mistakes, to seek reconciliation, and to turn them over to God. Sometimes it can be easy to ignore sins or to minimize them. But as Bryant’s priest reminded him, we just have to turn our sins over to God and his mercy will always be there for us. May we too have the fortitude to apologize, to go to confession, and to always remember that while we are sinners, we are always loved by God.

Second, we respond to that love by becoming a better person. Bryant went through marriage challenges, but worked through them with his wife. He looked at his life and wanted to do acts of mercy to help those in need. He strived to become that better man. In our lives, we can learn from him, and remind ourselves now is the time to act. If there is work to be done in our families or marriages for healing and reconciliation, don’t put it off, but start that process now. If we haven’t been spending enough time with loved ones, now is the time to act. And if we are thinking about helping others in need, volunteering, or getting more involved in a charitable organization or at the church, now is the time to act.

Each of us has such a great ability to do so much with what God has given us. Kobe brought joy to so many fans on the court. But he seemed to know God wasn’t as concerned with how many points he scored, but how he responded to the grace he was given. And he did that through seeking out mercy, and doing good for humanity. May he be welcomed home and receive something far better than a championship ring, the crown that never withers and fades. To quote Bishop Robert Barron, “No one can take you out of the hand of Jesus, except you. You can say I don’t want to cooperate, but if you hear the voice of the Lord, allow Him to grab you by the hand, hang on, because that hand, that voice, is going to lead you to eternal life.” It seems Bryant understood the truth of that statement. May we hear His voice too and follow Him with all our hearts.