

Fourth Sunday of Easter(C)

April 21, 2013.

“And the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7: 17).

Our hearts are heavy laden with sorrow today as we remember in our prayers the victims of the Islamic terrorist attack in Boston earlier this week. War and terror have come to our shores. Images of death and destruction born of hatred are seared into our memories and our hearts weep for the victims and their families, whose lives have now changed in ways beyond our imagining. Our second reading from the *Book of Revelation* gives voices to our prayer for the victims and their families. May God indeed “*wipe away every tear from their eyes*”; and may He give to the innocent victims of violence “*a share in the joys of heaven*” where “*the brave Shepherd has gone before*” us (Collect, Fourth Sunday of Easter, *The Roman Missal*).

How are we to understand what has taken place, and what can we do in the face of such wanton disregard for human life? Quite simply, we must speak the truth in love (Cf. *Eph. 4:15*) and be on guard against media disinformation. We must approach the challenges of an increasingly militant Islam with charity and with truth without falling into alarmism, hatred or bigotry. The wanton destruction of human life can in no way be reconciled with the teachings of Christianity because our faith teaches us that there are moral absolutes. *You shall not kill*. “In Islam, there are no moral absolutes beyond what is good for the advance and defense of Islam” (Robert Spencer, *Not Peace But a Sword*, San Diego: Catholic Answers, p. 241). This fundamental difference in moral outlook, and there are many others, should help us to understand that the tragedies that are being visited upon us with greater frequency are in fact, theologically driven. They are the expression of a theological outlook or worldview which is fundamentally different from ours for we assert and believe that all human beings are equal in dignity before God. Our ethic gives rise to a worldview in which we endeavour to foster and cherish life, everyone’s life.

Our Lord has commanded us: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5:43-45).* To understand what our Lord is asking of us in the face of this unspeakable act of terror we must be clear about the nature of this love. The love (*agape*) that we must bear for our enemies is an invincible goodwill or unconquerable benevolence. It means that we will not allow the bitterness that we feel to invade our hearts. And this, we all know is very difficult. And so with heavy hearts we turn to our Lord who says: “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30).* The God who speaks to words to us is the “*brave Shepherd, the Good Shepherd...who laid down his life for his sheep and willingly died for his flock*” (Communion Antiphon, Fourth Sunday of Easter, *The Roman Missal*). There is no weakness in these words.

There is rather, an invitation to learn from God Himself how we must face evil in the world. We must overcome it with good; not timidly but firmly and truthfully, in a manner that seeks to free even our enemies of the hatred and enmity that at face value renders them heartless in the face of so much suffering and wanton destruction of human life. The promise of a new heart is made to all. *“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ez. 36:26).

“Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). Yet our Lord also reminds us that *“out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man”* (Mt. 15:19-20) but *“the good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good”* (Lk. 6:45). It is goodness that we must endeavour to produce even in the face of unspeakable evil because this is what expected of us *“at the Saviour’s command and formed by divine teaching”* (The Communion Rite, *The Roman Missal*). *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”*.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (Jn. 10:27). We heard these words in our Gospel reading today. The voice and the language of the Good Shepherd, of God Himself, these are of the heart; and they can only be perceived and understood by those who keep their hearts with all vigilance; by those who seek purity of heart. The events of the past week have plunged our hearts in deep sorrow and yet we persevere in hope and in trust because the Good Shepherd has risen and our prayer, and most especially, the Eucharist that we receive sustains us and those who mourn for *“through Him the children of light rise to eternal life and the halls of the heavenly Kingdom are thrown open to faithful; for his Death is our ransom from death, and in his rising the life of all has risen”* (Preface II of Easter, *The Roman Missal*).

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