

5th Sunday of Easter, Year A

A key theme of today's readings is expressed in the Response to the Psalm: 'Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you'(Psalm 33:22). These are the final words of Psalm 33. They are also the final words of the *Te Deum*, an ancient hymn of praise sung on all the important festivals of the Church's Year. Since the 9th century it has been ascribed to St Ambrose who is said to have composed it for the baptism of St Augustine in 387AD. Today's psalm invites us to trust because God 'fills the earth with his love'(Psalm 33:5) – a theme repeated in each Mass when we proclaim: 'Heaven and earth are full of your glory'.

Today I wish to ask a hard question: Can we honestly pray these words in the light of the violence that breaks out all too frequently in our troubled world with the consequent human degradation and suffering? No doubt there are those who would consider today's psalm something of a bad joke, or the prayer of a community that is putting its head in the sand and refusing to look at the awful state of the real world. How could a God of love allow such atrocities, we might ask.

The author of the psalm was not unfamiliar with such terrible evils, but this did not stop him from declaring his faith in God's love, and the Christian community down through the ages, constantly traumatised by similar atrocities, continues to repeat his words, even today: 'the earth is full of your steadfast love'(Psalm 119:64). 'Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you'(Psalm 33:22).

Our faith cannot be an escape. We must name evil when we see it, and we must oppose it. So-called 'ethnic cleansing' of which our generation has seen far too much is an appalling evil. Driven by fear, haunted by memories of past oppression, we human beings tend to revert to the protection of our tribe or race by demonizing those who differ from us and whom we see as threatening us, and by combining in what we might call 'a coalition of the willing' to obliterate those we define as our enemies, in order to ease our fear. No one doubts that there is a certain logic in this, but it is directly contrary to the revelation given us in Jesus, to the very basis of Christianity, and it ignores a teaching that is central to Jesus' revelation: He called us to do what he did: 'Love your enemies!' Atrocities committed in the name of asserting the rights of one's race or nation are still atrocities and God who hears the cry of the poor and oppressed calls upon us to have the will and the courage to oppose such evils. This much is clear.

The question then must be asked about the means we choose when we oppose evil. Paul's words are relevant here: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'(Romans 12:21). From the time of Constantine through to the modern period, that is to say during the thousand and more years when the Christian community ruled Europe and imposed its will on the populace, prior to the separation of Church and State that freed the Church to be Church, the best the Church could come up with was its teaching on what constitutes a just war. As it stands this is wise teaching. It does put some brakes on our tendency to be aggressive against real or perceived enemies. However, it comes out of thinking that is based on the need for control, for law and order. It bypasses the radical call of Jesus: 'Love your enemies'. Let me remind you of the principles enunciated by the teaching on what constitutes a just war.

The first principle is that communities have the right to defend themselves against unjust aggression. As regards the use of military force in such defence, the Catholic Catechism n.2309 spells out the key considerations, demanding rigorous consideration of the following strict conditions:

- the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community must be lasting, grave and certain.
- All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.
- There must be serious prospects of success.
- The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs heavily in evaluating this condition.
- The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good.

Faced with violence what are we to do as disciples of Jesus?

Firstly we can look at Calvary. Wherever we look, apart from Jesus, we see evil: the priests, the Pharisees, the crowd, the absent disciples. An innocent man is being crucified because of political and religious hypocrisy. As in the violent situations confronting us, the evil is enough to overwhelm us. That is why we must look at Jesus. To see Calvary without seeing Jesus is to allow the fascination of evil to blind us. He did not despair. The opening words of today's Gospel are meant to express Jesus' sentiments as he was dying this terrible death: 'Trust in God still and trust in me'. He was not avoiding the reality, and he could not resist the cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' But he kept trusting, he kept loving, he kept forgiving.

Let us look at the beloved Disciple standing by the cross, trying to console Jesus' mother while the one he loves is being callously jeered at and murdered before his eyes. John is not running away from reality. However he sees something here which reaches beyond the pain. He sees a heart rent asunder by a soldier's lance and yet continuing to pour our love. The hill of Calvary is busy with those whose hearts are so closed to love that they can perpetrate or support this atrocity. Their actions defy analysis, for sin is always irrational, absurd. Truly 'they know not what they do'. But God is there in the midst of this mess. God is there in the heart of his Son, and he is indeed flooding the earth with his love.

The Roman authorities and the religious leaders saw Jesus as the threat, the enemy, and they did what we humans have always done, and, resisting grace, keep on doing. They used their power to eliminate him. The shock of Calvary is that Jesus accepted the violence, but responded with forgiveness and love, thus cutting through the logic of violence and counter-violence, of revenge and counter-revenge. During the long centuries when the Church was corrupted by the Empire and by its responsibility to rule the State, in public affairs it opted for control, rather than love. Hence the atrocities of the Inquisition, and the Religious wars within Europe and outside. Hence 'Christianity' is seen by Islam as an antagonistic political power, and by Judaism

as oppressive. Those who look at the Church from the outside, see these errors. We have to admit to them, repent of them and rediscover the power of love, rather than fear in winning hearts to the God of Jesus.

We must not let the evil overwhelm us and neutralise our power to love for it is this love alone that has the power to change people's hearts. The Roman centurion was deeply moved when he saw the way Jesus died: 'Indeed, this was a Son of God'. Paul was converted by the way in which Stephen (one of the deacons mentioned in today's Second Reading) died, with Jesus' words of forgiveness and trust on his lips (Acts 7:59-60).

Besides looking on Calvary let us look honestly at our own hearts. Are we any different from the people responsible for perpetrating the atrocities that sicken us? If we were constrained by fear, would we act differently? The history of apparently civilised people acting in barbaric ways ought to give us pause. There are some questions we can ask.

- How ready are we ready to forgive, or do we harbour resentments?
- Do we truly recognise that every single person is sacred, whatever his or her race or religious persuasion?

If we cannot give a positive answer to these questions, we had better know that we are nurturing the very sentiments that enable the atrocities that so horrify us. We must resolve to stop living lives that are careless and distracted. We must resolve to cease from hurting others, allowing our warped perceptions of our own needs to so dominate our thoughts and desires that we neglect those who are asking for our love. Are we living in ways that are so superficial that our souls and our hearts are left aside starving for nourishment, for companionship, for love?

In the face of sin and its consequences, the Church today encourages us to cry out for mercy while we continue to trust in God: 'Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you'. It is true that our lives are surrounded by grace. All day long angels are ministering to us if only we had eyes to see. We are surrounded by all the martyrs and saints of our Church interceding for us and urging us to take time to pray, take time to receive the immense love which is being offered to us, take time for our souls to breathe. At every moment we are being loved into life by God who is gracing us to surrender to his love and so be radiant sacraments of his love in our hurting world. If we each open ourselves to allow the radiance of God's creative love to enter and purify and energise our lives, the radiant beauty of God's love will become apparent to all, and his love will be seen to fill the whole earth: 'Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you'.