

Sunday after the horrific massacre on Bali (12 October 2002)

Our entire population is in mourning for the shocking action that killed so many people, a majority of them Australians, a week ago in Bali. Each one's personal pain is known only to you, depending to some extent on whether or not we know some of the victims personally, but we are all in a state of shock.

A phrase that we have been hearing speaks of the callous destruction of innocent life. In our hearts we know that none of us is entirely innocent, but it is surely true that the vast majority of people killed in any of the violent actions that happen in our world can truly be called 'innocent'. This is true for what we recognise as a just war. It is all the more true of such blatant acts of terror as happened on Bali.

It would be naïve to deny that some people act in ways that are evil. Bali is a flagrant example., but it is still surely true that the vast majority of Australians, and of Palestinians, and Jews, and Iraqis, are good people doing their best to love those who need and welcome their love.

When I searched the readings for help, my attention was drawn to the Second Reading in which Paul thanks God for the faith, hope, and love of the community in Thessalonica. The key word is love, but it is faith that keeps us looking at Jesus crucified so that we will learn to love, even and especially in situations that are evil as was the crucifying of Jesus. This morning I would like to reflect with you briefly on the third virtue: that of hope.

We sometimes think of hope as a kind of expectation by which we look forward to something that will happen in the future. We hope for answers that we cannot yet find. We hope for healing when we are ill. We hope for the communion of heaven as we experience suffering on earth. There is a place for this looking forward, but that is not precisely the meaning of hope as one of the three pivotal virtues in our Christian life. Hope, rather, is the virtue whereby we are so trusting in God that we can leave the future confidently in God's hands and focus all our attention on the present, so that we can find the best way of loving in the real circumstances in which we find ourselves – even when those circumstances are as horrific and Calvary or Bali. A beautiful example of hope is found in Psalm 131:

'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up in proud, my eyes are not raised too high.
I do not occupy myself with great and wondrous matters that are beyond me.
No, I hold myself in quiet and silence, like a little child with its mother,
like the little child that is with me, so is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time on and forevermore'.

A baby at the breast is entirely focussed. If there are real concerns – and there generally are – it is the mother or father who is doing the worrying. At the same time, we can learn a lesson from the baby. We have to remind ourselves that there is no such reality as the future. What we think of as future is only real when it is actually present. Prior to that it is nothing more than a figment of our imagination. It fills us with dread at times because we do not have the strength to cope with it, nor do we have the grace. The reason is that it is not present and so not real. If ever it becomes real, then we will have the grace and the strength to bear it, but not now.

Paul assures us:

'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'(1Corinthians 10:13).

'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5).

God has poured his Spirit into our hearts, and God will continue to do so. When we are afraid of the future, we are to call this truth to mind, and, like the child in its mother's arm, place our trust in God and still our hearts. We are then free to focus on the grace of the present moment and give all our energies to receiving and giving love now as best we can. God loves us. Everything is

to be seen in that light. Paul tells us that nothing else really matters except that we learn to love, and John of the Cross reminds us that: 'At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love'.

So – faced with Bali what are we to do.

1. Of course we must oppose evil as best we can – so long as we look at the way Jesus opposed evil. Paul puts it well: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:21). We must not ever give way to revenge, and we must not hurt innocent people. This is something that the suicide bombers in Palestine offend against, as does the State-terror of Israel against which they are fighting. That cycle of evil cannot be broken by those means. As Australians we, too, must look hard again at our treatment of asylum seekers, many of whom have been fleeing terror. We must take means to protect ourselves against evil, but we must listen to Jesus and not respond with evil.

2. We must renew our hope in God. The author of the Book of Lamentation lived through the destruction of Jerusalem. He describes his suffering in moving and graphic imagery and concludes with the words:

'My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is. I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.'... My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'

(Lamentations 3:17-24)

3. Finally, may I read the conclusion to Paul's Second Letter to Corinth. The Christian community there was in great suffering and was causing a lot of suffering to Paul. After dealing with the problems, Paul offers us excellent advice in any situation of conflict, and perhaps you might find his advice helpful in dealing with this present bewildering suffering:

Brothers and sisters, set things straight

Paul uses a medical term for setting a broken limb. There are things in every community and in every nation that need to be put in order. We must look at ourselves before we blame others, and put our house in order. That is something we can do.

listen to my appeal

The risen Jesus has been appealing to the community through Paul's words. It would help if we listened to the prophets in our church and in our nation who point the way forward in love, and stopped defending our present prejudices just because they are ours.

work for understanding

Listen to people of varying opinions and work for a meeting of minds rather than looking for a fight.

Work for peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Paul concludes with a prayer: ' May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you'. Let us pray for that for each other.