

Solemn Commemoration of the Passion of the Lord

Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart

My brothers and sisters in Christ,

A friend of mine, a French monk who has lived in the United States for many years, some years ago spent time in the Holy Land, a sort of prolonged retreat in the place where the dramatic events we just heard about actually took place. On his return, I asked him about the experience. He said that it was like living in a chain reaction of evil. Survivors of genocide had driven the inhabitants from their lands. These victims in turn tried to exterminate their persecutors as well as other factions of their own people. Violence constantly begat more violence.

The experience of so many tragedies led my friend to a new appreciation for Jesus, who refused to pass on the violence that was done to him. Jesus tells Peter to put away his sword. Jesus admits to Pilate that he is a king, but would not summon his subject to his bloody defense. In fact, his only mission was to testify to the truth. What is more, the evil that was done to him, died with him. He refused to pass it on.

Jesus had every confidence that his death would bring people to know Him. Earlier in John's Gospel, he promised, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself". The victory of the Cross would be won not through domination, not through power or coercion, not through violence, but only through truth and love. The Cross invites to absorb that message and bring it into our own lives so that we can become people of gentleness, forgiveness, and love -- even of our enemies.

So then, does following Christ always mean surrendering oneself passively to defeat and to death?" On the contrary! Before entering into his passion, He says to his disciples, "Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). Christ has overcome the world by overcoming the evil of the world. The definitive victory of good over evil that will be manifested at the end of time has already come to pass on the cross of Christ. "Now," he said, "is the judgment of this world" (Jn 12:31). From that day forth, evil is losing, and it is losing that much more when it seems to be triumphing more. It has already been judged and condemned in its ultimate expression with a sentence that cannot be appealed.

Jesus overcame violence not by opposing it with a greater violence but by enduring it and exposing all its injustice and futility. He inaugurated a new kind of victory that St. Augustine summed up in three words: "Victor quia victima: "[He is a] Victor because [he was a] victim." It was seeing him die this way that caused the Roman centurion to exclaim, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15:39). Others asked themselves what the "loud cry" emitted by

the dying Jesus could mean. The centurion, who was schooled in warfare, knew exactly what it meant. He recognized at once that it was a cry of victory.

The problem of violence disturbs us, shocks us, and it has invented new and horrendous forms of cruelty and barbarism today. Last Sunday came the news of the massacre of 47 worshippers in two Egyptian cities, whose “crime” was that they were Christians. We Christians are horrified at the idea that people can kill in God’s name. Someone, however, could object, “But isn’t the Bible also full of stories of violence? Isn’t God called ‘the Lord of hosts – the Lord of the armies? Isn’t the order to exterminate whole cities attributed to him? Isn’t he the one who prescribes numerous cases for the death penalty in the Law of Moses?”

If they had addressed those same objections to Jesus during his life, he would surely have responded with what he said regarding divorce: “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8). The same is true for violence: “at the beginning it was not so.” The first chapter of Genesis presents a world where violence is not even thinkable, neither among human beings themselves nor between people and animals. Not even to avenge the death of Abel, and therefore punish a murderer, is it permissible to kill (cf. Gn 4, 15).

God’s true intention is expressed by the commandment “You shall not kill” more than by the exceptions to that command in the law, which were concessions to the “hardness of heart” and to people’s hard-hearted practices.

In a very special way Jesus comes this week into the turmoil of New Jersey, our country and our world. He brings not a sword, but salvation – the opportunity, if we are willing, to choose life over death, love over hate. His resurrection reveals the power of God to redeem and make new.

There may never be a more important moment than this for our churches to proclaim the message of God’s passion to mend the brokenness of our world. There may never be a more demanding time to lift up the captivating example of Jesus who stoops to serve and invites estranged persons to dine with him. Who did not answer violence with violence. Who did not rebel against God but trusted that His Father would not permit death to have the final word.