

Good Friday
April 3, 2015
Homily for the Liturgy of the Day
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA John 18:1-19:42

The terrorist attack that took place in Garissa, Kenya first targeted a Christian prayer meeting. I know why the Christians were gathered, as it was Holy Thursday, but I don't know whether the Muslims who attacked them knew the significance of the day. You may have heard that the Islamists from Al Shabab left the prayer meeting and attacked the university there. At the college they separated the Muslims from the Christians, allowed the Muslims to live, and then after making them lie down shot each of the Christians in the back of the head. One hundred forty-seven died. Each of them, of course, had the opportunity to deny their Lord and save their earthly lives. But just as the Coptic Christians remained firm in their faith earlier this year, the Kenyan Christians loved the Lord even unto death.

The significance of the day, we know, is that this massacre occurred on the anniversary of St. Peter's denial of Jesus Christ. As we just heard in St. John's Passion, St. Peter had three opportunities to confess his love and devotion to our Lord, and three times Peter insisted that he did not know Him. The Kenyans who died yesterday followed in the footsteps of St. Peter, but not the Peter of Holy Thursday. They followed the St. Peter who made the great confession thirty-five years after first stumbling, suffering crucifixion upside-down under the Emperor Nero around 64 A.D. In his youth, St. Peter feared the power of the Emperor, but by the time he was an old man, St. Peter knew the power of Jesus Christ was greater. He laid down his life for his fellow disciples as Jesus had first laid down His life for him.

St. John's Passion contrasts the earthly power of the Roman Empire with the genuine, eternal power of Christ the King. On the one hand we see the fear inspired by the power of a terroristic state that tortures people to death so regularly that everyone knew what Jesus was talking about when He said He would be lifted up. The disciples fled, the first pope denied his Lord three times, and the Jewish authorities were reduced to sycophants, insisting before Pontius Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar." Did they really believe this? We don't know, but what we do know from John, chapter 11, is that they were so terrified of Roman power that the high priest himself advocated that Jesus be killed so that the Romans would not come to destroy the Temple and the Jewish people.

Life under terrorism leads people to make compromises, even the advocacy for the death of the innocent for the sake of the guilty. Since we know Muslims are now targeting Christians world-wide, how do we resist? How do we refuse compromise when in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Kenya, Nigeria—actually too many places to name—Christians are being killed for no other reason and precisely because they are Christian? However unlikely it may be, the same violence could be visited upon us. How do we prepare ourselves to follow the St. Peter who received the palm of martyrdom under Nero and not the St. Peter who was a slave to fear on Holy Thursday? How do we thwart the designs of wicked terrorists who would have us deny Jesus to save our lives?

One of the disciplines that has always been helpful to me when I have had to suffer unjustly has been to recall my own guilt. In my youth I chafed under a boss once who was rude, unpredictable, and insensitive; and though I had never done anything to her to deserve such treatment, I got through that time by recalling how often I had been rude, unpredictable and insensitive to those closest to me. I understood that I was not guiltless, and my suffering in the present circumstance was making reparation for the sins

of my past life. It is much easier to accept suffering when we are able to acknowledge that we too often have been the cause of it. And on Good Friday it is especially important that we recall Jesus suffered on our behalf; He died because we sinned. As wicked as our oppressors may be, we are not guiltless. I do not know if this was a consolation in their last hour to the Kenyans who died yesterday, but I am certain that it would be an encouragement to you should you ever be called to suffer as they did.

The second thing that will help us to bear our cross even unto death is to remember that Jesus didn't die just for us. He died even for our persecutors and desires that they, too, may repent of their sin and be saved. We recall that Jesus in our Gospel today entrusted His Blessed Mother to St. John, St. John who had just hours before run away and abandoned our Lord as His Passion began. He forgave John, and the next words He would say to the beloved disciple were, "Peace be with you," the assurance that the Lord holds no grudges and happily welcomes those who change course and entrust themselves to His loving embrace.

This reality played itself out in another era more than 530 years ago, during a different but similar outburst of Muslim violence directed at the Church. After the siege of Otranto had ended, more than 800 able-bodied men were captured, and the Ottomans demanded they convert to Islam. Their leader, Antonio Primaldi, declared, "Now it is time for us to fight to save our souls for the Lord. And since He died on the cross for us, it is fitting that we should die for Him." As the executions began, one of the Ottoman officers named Bersabei was converted and confessed Jesus Christ. It was August 14, 1480. He died the same day, having received baptism by his own blood. Had the Martyrs of Otranto not been steadfast to the end, Bersabei's soul may well have been lost because of the murders in which he was complicit. Today he is a saint of the Catholic Church, one of the men with a palm branch in his hand who worships eternally before the Throne of Grace. Our witness has the potential to convert even our persecutors, just as Jesus' witness converted the Roman soldier who pierced His side.

The last encouragement that we can take with us is the most compelling, for it concerns God's very nature. The crucifixion of our Lord is the image of God's great love for His human creation. We saw in the Passion today that Jesus embraced His death for our salvation voluntarily. He said to Peter, "Put your sword in its sheath; shall I not drink the chalice which the Father has given me?" Love cannot be forced. Those who would coerce us into embracing a different religion, who would threaten us to comply with their demands, are not acting in accordance with the nature of God, who requires that our love for Him be of our own volition. He initiates that love, but then expects that our response will come from the heart. Our repentance, our contrition, our thanksgiving and our good deeds are all to be undertaken with the same freedom by which He offered Himself for us.

We know that if our adversaries ask us to embrace God out of fear for what terrors they may visit upon us, we can be sure such messengers are not from God at all; not only can they not trust that our conversion is real, we would not be able to trust our new master, for we cannot know what he may force us to do next. We know also that he doesn't love us as God does, because God doesn't threaten to kill us in order that we believe. He allowed Himself to be killed to increase our faith in His love. May we remember that love, as our Kenyan brothers and sisters did, should those who deal in terror ever ask us to forget it.