

Third Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 24:35-48

When the United States invaded Iraq twelve years ago, the exodus of Christians from the Middle East began again in earnest. Iraq under Saddam Hussein had about 1.5 million Christian citizens and now is home to fewer than five hundred thousand. Syria's civil war has accelerated the departure of Christians from that region, as the growth of the Islamic State has seen Christian areas in both Iraq and Syria depleted almost completely of their ancient populations.

What we are seeing today is horrific, but it is essentially a repeat of events to which Pope Francis drew attention on April 11. This week will mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Armenian genocide, which was accompanied by the Assyrian genocide, and then followed by the Greek genocide. Between 1915 and 1923, nearly three million Christians were killed in what is today the nation of Turkey. Believing their Christian population to be a fifth column that threatened the security of the Ottoman Empire, and motivated by Islamic ideology and the desire for Christian wealth, modern-day Turkey was basically emptied of its Christian population to the extent that Turkey is now more than 99% Muslim.

The Turkish state denied genocide took place, though the state's complicity in the organized slaughter of Christians is well documented and acknowledged by historians across the globe. Though President Obama pledged to recognize formally the Armenian genocide when he ran for office in 2008, our State Department has yet to do so, so our own nation is cooperating in Turkey's deceit. The Holy See, however, is not so cowardly; so when our Holy Father called the Armenian genocide the first genocide of the 20th century, Turkey recalled its ambassador from Vatican City.

I could talk to you for an hour about the political implications of this dispute, but that is not my concern today. Rather, I want you to notice in our lesson from Acts and in today's Gospel that repentance and forgiveness of sins go hand in hand. St. Peter says in Acts, chapter 3, "Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out." Opening the Scriptures to the disciples, Jesus says at the end of St. Luke's Gospel ". . . that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem." Repentance is a necessary component of our redemption in the Blood of the Cross, so to the degree that we refuse to repent or even admit we did anything wrong, we imperil our souls, we imperil our salvation.

Let me be clear that forgiveness of sins for all time was accomplished on the altar of the cross at Calvary; and everyone, no matter his race or creed, has access to that grace if he will confess Jesus as Lord. So our sins are forgiven, but the question is whether our sins will nevertheless be held against us at the Judgment Day. Though we have been forgiven, will we access that forgiveness and thus escape condemnation? Do we accept God's love for us by loving Him in return, or do we reject God's love by our refusal to acknowledge how we have offended Him?

The issue is one of justice first, which is followed immediately by mercy. Justice requires that we give to each his due. Sin, however, is a failure with regard to justice because it is a turning away from Him who has given us everything, from our moral lives to the possibility of our redemption in the Blood

of the Cross. Insofar as sin is disobedience of God's law, we act unjustly when we sin because we owe God our obedience by virtue of our existence. Since He made us, justice requires that we do as He says.

Yet all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so our Gospel today teaches us that Jesus, the Son of God, suffered on our behalf. His death takes the place of our death, which justice would otherwise demand. How do we access this mercy? How do we escape condemnation and rest in the assurance that Jesus has already paid the price for our sin?

Very simply, through repentance. In order to access the forgiveness that God in Jesus Christ offers freely to all, we must be sorry for the ways we have offended our heavenly Father. That sorrow for sins, that remorse, will lead us to be reconciled to God through baptism, whereby our sins are washed away and our life restored. Should we sin again mortally after our baptism, we have access to God's redeeming grace in the Sacrament of Penance, since the Church has been given the authority by Jesus to pronounce forgiveness to those who confess their sins, are sorry for them, and intend not to sin again.

If we do not repent, God gives no access to His grace of redemptive mercy because we have not acknowledged our need for it. Not only do we fail to see the injustice of offending God, we also fail to recognize our dependence upon Him who gave us life and every other blessing we enjoy. To receive mercy and escape justice, in other words, we must approach the Throne of Grace in a spirit of justice, bewailing our sins, not because of the consequences we have suffered or may yet suffer, but because those sins are an offense to Him who is holy. We in our ingratitude for our lives will only escape God's justice if we demonstrate our gratitude for God's mercy.

We should, therefore, tremble for the people of Turkey. Though no one alive today is responsible for the genocide perpetrated against millions of Christians beginning one hundred years ago this week, the refusal of the Turks to acknowledge the sins of their fathers will issue in God's judgment upon their nation. They may not have committed the genocide, but they are most certainly responsible for failing to admit genocide happened and concurrently are responsible for refusing to make reparation to those their fathers and mothers persecuted. Pope Francis said this refusal on the part of Turkey amounts to letting an open wound bleed, with no concern for the suffering of the afflicted.

God forbid that this ever be said about our sins. When we acknowledge our sins and tell the Lord we are sorry for them, we make an attempt to bind up the wounds we ourselves have caused. Our attention to the afflicted is to give attention to Christ Himself, for even as we do it to the least of these His brethren, we do it to Him. We know that our sins issued in Christ's crucifixion, so we are without excuse. Perhaps mercy may yet come to the people of Turkey because as Muslims they don't know Jesus died for their sins.

Of course, we can't know this at all, whether God will be merciful because they are ignorant. Therefore, Pope Francis' words called for justice for the Armenians in what they suffered, but they were also offered out of his great love for the Turks. His words were not political, but moral. He is calling them to repentance, offering them the conversion of heart that issues in God's mercy. If they don't repent, they may well pay a steep price, and this is a price we should not want any to pay, even our worst enemy and, yes, even the enemies of the Cross we strive against today.