

Repent and Be Faithful to the Gospel

On this on this past Ash Wednesday, many of us joined with the Church throughout the world in receiving ashes on our foreheads, to begin the 40 day, Lenten journey to Easter... at least, that is, those of us who could get out in the frigid cold and snow! At the liturgies here at All Saints, I asked the question: 'Might there be a more meaningful symbol for us 21<sup>st</sup>-century, sophisticated Christians to serve to begin our Lenten retreat, ...our Lenten 'spring-cleaning of our hearts,' other than a smudge of ashes retrieved from the burnt palms of last Palm Sunday...??

Then, we reflected on the reality that: *we live on and among some monstrous ash heaps!*

- countless wars that have reduced millions of innocent human beings to ashes...;
- violence and crime on our streets have made many of our cities ash heaps...;
- too many people living amid the ashes of poverty, disease, abuse, enslavement in our Global Village, our nation and our own city...;
- much of the air we breathe and water we drink is full of the ashes of pollutants...;
- our own violence of anger, selfishness and arrogance that leave too many of our relationships in the ashes of estrangement and division...;
- the ashes of self-negation, self-doubt, even self-hatred – that can so often paralyze us and break our spirits...;

And the list goes on... .

Who then can say that ashes are no longer a symbol that speaks to 21<sup>st</sup>-century people like us???

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As I began to prepare my Homily for this weekend, reflecting a bit on how might this Lent be worthwhile in my own life and how might it be a meaningful time for all of us, I became increasingly distracted and then increasingly anxious as I listened to the news and read the newspapers.

The civilized world is horrified at the absolute evil actions of ISIS and other terrorist groups: the beheadings and burnings of victims, the slaughter of the innocent by these extreme terrorists – blinded by ideology, intoxicated with hatred.

I thought President Obama made a great point recently at a Prayer Breakfast in Washington, when he pointed out that these terrorists no more are true to Islam – than the Crusades and Inquisition were being true to Jesus... ..

Sisters and brothers, we must remain conscious of this truth to protect and prevent our Muslim sisters and brothers – nationally and globally – from being made scapegoats to our fears and frustrations.

As the global community comes together to try to stop this horror – which is a formidable task – it seems to me, that we – as Disciples of Jesus – must be part of the discussion, must be part of the debate.

To be honest, brothers and sisters, what frightens me, and compels me to address this issue on the first weekend of Lent, is what appears to be a rapidly increasing drumbeat for our Nation to become even more involved in this international war (that our Pope Francis and others fear could be the beginning of a 3rd World War) with the increasing call to put “boots on the ground”! What putting “boots on the ground” means literally is making the decision to sacrifice the lives of many of our young men and women in yet another international conflict – in which many experts say there is no possibility of a military solution. A national poll on Wednesday indicated that at this time, over 50% of Americans support “putting boots on the ground” ... ..

I am no military or political or international expert, but after living through Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, I must ask the question: If war ever was a viable means of solving a conflict, is it a means of solving conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Look at our recent history:

- over 50,000 Americans were killed in the Vietnam War; well over 50,000 Vietnam War veterans have died prematurely from alcoholism, drug addiction, untreated mental illness and suicide since they returned home... . Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese citizens lost their lives. For what? As we look back 40 years – we ask the question: For what?
- Recent reports point out that a post-war Iraq – in disarray following a war where thousands of U.S. soldiers and some 650,000 innocent Iraqis lost their lives – is the major seedbed, birthing those terrorists... who in their whole lives have experienced nothing other than war... .
- The war in Afghanistan – the longest war of American involvement in history – was called to: “eliminate the terrorist threat...”

Sisters and brothers, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results....

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The message of Jesus in today’s Gospel is short and simple: it takes up just one verse in today’s *four* verse Gospel:

*“This is the time of fulfillment: the kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe in the good news!”*

Jesus was convinced that God is among us – working effectively in our daily lives. But: unless we repent... change our value system and make people and their needs the most important part of our existence, we will never actually experience God working effectively among us. *This* is the purpose of our 40 day annual Lenten retreat.

Sisters and brothers, for the last 1700 years, the Christian community has for the most part ignored, dismissed, denied, and even been embarrassed by this primary teaching of Jesus – that violence is immoral, unethical, *evil...*; and, *evil begets evil*: the blood of one war feeds the seeds for the next! Historically, Christians have killed more Christians and others than any other religion in the history of humanity... How can we teach people that killing is wrong by... *killing*?! Sisters and brothers: Christianity must “repent and become faithful to the Gospel,” as expressed in the words prayed as ashes were crossed on our foreheads.

*“You have heard it said: ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth;’ but I tell you this: do not oppose evil with evil.”*

*“You have heard it said: ‘love your neighbor and hate you’re your enemy;’ but I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

Brothers and sisters, I raise this painful issue as we begin our Lenten spring-cleaning of the heart, not to conclude in a naïve and simplistic way that there are simple answers to the urgent international crisis; but rather to join the call of Pope John XXIII, Prophet of the Second Vatican Council and other contemporary Christian leaders, to begin to think differently: as disciples of Jesus to begin facing the issue of war and violence from a Gospel perspective and to repent from the illusion that violence and war and militarism are compatible with the Gospel...; to get out of the box and begin to think differently and to join others in developing non-lethal means of solving conflicts, while addressing the root causes of the conflicts, which are injustice, poverty, oppression, corruption and greed.... As Pope Paul VI said so well in the 1960s at the United Nations, in his now classic statement: “If you truly want peace, work for justice!” We live in a culture seeped in violence... addicted to violence: currently the top two highest grossing films in the country are “Fifty Shades of Grey,” celebrating pornography and “American Sniper.”

During these 40 days of Lent, I invite us to reflect on the issue of violence - with the New York Times in one hand and the Gospels in the other... . We often sing: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me...”. Perhaps during these days, we can get in touch with the violence that might exist in our own hearts: ... how hard we can be – emotionally, spiritually and sometimes even physically... toward ourselves; our loved ones; our neighbors; and pray for the grace to turn away from violence toward forgiveness and healing and reconciliation. Secondly, we might get involved in the national debate as our Nation faces major decisions concerning our future...

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Anthony DeMello wrote:

“Humanity is not naturally cruel. We *become* cruel when we surrender to an ideology. One ideology against another; one system against another; one religion against another. And humanity is crushed between them.

“The men who crucified Jesus were probably not cruel men. They could very well have been gentle husband and loving fathers who became capable of great cruelty to maintain a system or ideology or religion or institution.

“If religious people had always followed the instinct of their heart rather than the logic of their religion, we would have been spared the sight of heretics burning at the stakes, widows walking into funeral pyres and millions of innocent people slaughtered in wars that are waged in the name of religion and God.”

This year we mark the 35th Anniversary of the death of Bishop Oscar Romero, who has just been recognized as a Martyr by the Church. As many of us know, he was killed on March 24<sup>th</sup> and just the day before, in his Homily, he share these words, appealing to the military troops in El Salvador:

“We are your people – the peasants you kill... are our own brothers and sisters. When you are commanded to kill, remember instead the voice of God: ‘Thou shall not kill.’ In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people whose cries rise to Heaven: I beseech you, I beg you, I command you: stop the oppression!”

Amen