

Friday, April 14, 2017, Good Friday

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Focus: The love of Jesus's cross overcomes the evil of the world.

I learned something about the cross this week.

All week long, I have been haunted by what happened to our brothers and sisters in Egypt. At the start of this Holy Week, on Palm Sunday, Christians there went to worship just like the rest of us to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. But while we were singing, "All glory, laud, and honor, to you redeemer king, to whom the lips of children, made sweet hosannas ring," a different ring went out from two churches in Egypt. The ring of sirens and the ring of wailing and mourning and lamentation, as two churches there were bombed. The ring of "Rachel weeping for her children." As we are gathered here this evening, at least forty-five men, women, and children, our brothers and sisters in Christ and children of God, lie dead.

Of all the images of pain and suffering the past couple weeks, this one really hits me. It is unthinkable to me that in this, the holiest of weeks, Christians could gather in a church and be killed not because they simply were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but precisely because they were in the right place at the right time. They were killed for being faithful.

What do we as Christians do in the face of such evil? Well, my instinct is to be like Peter in this evening's story. Peter sees Jesus being wrongly arrested and strikes out at the first person he can find, cutting off the slave's ear. I mean it's so easy to say that Peter doesn't get it. But what would we do? Isn't Peter showing courage? Isn't he showing that his devotion to Jesus is real and credible? If we were there and a man was being taken away for no reason to be tried and put to death, don't we hope that we would muster up the courage to do something? Isn't that what we do? Isn't that what we do when we launch drone strikes or when we bomb an airfield or drop the "mother of bombs" in Afghanistan? And can anyone blame Peter—can anyone blame us—for wanting to do something, wanting to fight, even if it's only cutting off an ear or dropping a bomb?

"My kingdom is not from this world," says Jesus. "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." We know that's true. We fight and we fight and we fight, and we are no closer to the kingdom of God than when we started.

This week I learned something about the cross because I learned what it means to live and die like Christ even in the kingdom of the world. On Monday evening, Fr. Boules George, a Coptic priest who lives near the attacks, preached a powerful sermon called "A Message to Those Who Kill Us." He remarked that on the whole, the attacks had ironically helped the church grow. A usually empty building was packed to overflow that night. And then he preached words that can only be spoken from the foot of the cross. He said:

"The second part of our message we want to send is that we love you.... We Christians don't have enemies. We don't have enemies; others make enmity with us. The Christian doesn't make

enemies because we are commanded to love everyone. And so, we love you because this is the teaching of our God—that I'm to love you—no matter what you do to me.”

“No matter what you do to me,” I love you. That is the Good News of Good Friday. On Maundy Thursday, we heard the words that “Jesus loved them to the end.” The very end. No matter what they did to him: whether they betrayed him, arrested him, mocked him, tortured him, nailed him to a cross, pierced his side, Jesus always loved them. And that’s the way Jesus loves us today. Even when his heart weeps and he mourns “what have you done?” as our brothers’ and sisters’ blood cries out to him from the ground, we hear his voice from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus shows us courage of a different kind: the courage to love no matter what. The power of the cross is not in swords or nails or bombs, but in love and forgiveness. Fighting can make corpses. But it can’t make an enemy into a friend. It can’t make love where there is hatred. It can’t bring resurrection from the dead. **Only the cross can do that.** The blood that heals our world and our lives is not shed by our defeated enemies, but by the heart of Jesus.

Jesus’s victory on the cross overcomes the world. When he said, “it is finished,” it was his final judgment that nothing in the world could stop him. Not the betrayals, not swords, not clubs, not a crown of thorns, not nails, not the devil himself. The sun could not set on his love that Good Friday, and it never will. We live in the kingdom of the world, a world that is often in tears, a world that is often seething with hatred, a world that crucified the Son of God, but it’s also the world that God loves. It is the world that on this day, his Son redeemed. It’s the world where we can learn to trust that no matter what they do to us and no matter what we do to each other, Jesus’s great work of love is finished. The words written in his blood cannot be unwritten: the words that he is the real king of this world, and in his kingdom, love always overcomes evil. Above the strife of Good Friday, in Egypt, as in the kingdom of heaven, the lips of children are still ringing: “All glory, laud, and honor, to you redeemer king,” for “by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” **Amen.**