



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Author: The Rev. Deacon Charles Mock

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Exodus 3:1-15
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Gospel Luke 13:1-9

I was just heading upstairs to start work on this sermon last Thursday evening when the news broke about the terrible events in Madrid, a city I know very well and love dearly. Naturally, when I finally did sit down to write this, my thoughts were focused on the question such incidents always provoke – the meaning of death, especially sudden, random and apparently meaningless death. Today's reading from Luke certainly lends itself to such thoughts.

In today's Gospel persons unknown tell Jesus about a protest or uprising of some sort, during the course of which Pilate's troops 'opened fire' so to speak, which resulted in the violent death of some of the Galilean demonstrators. Though Luke doesn't say so, it seems likely that this conversation took place in the context of a discussion about whether violent and unexpected death is to be understood as God's punishment for sin. In any event, Jesus takes the opportunity to dismiss that notion. The victims of this incident, he says, were no worse sinners than other Galileans, and he adds, referring to the recent collapse of a building in Jerusalem that claimed 18 innocent lives, that the same applies to the victims of what we would call a 'natural disaster'. So far, so good. However, Jesus typically complicates the matter by saying to his followers that unless they repent, they too will perish in the same way.

There seems to be a contradiction here, for this seems to imply that - at least in the case of Jesus' followers— such a death would indeed be a punishment, a consequence of our failure to repent.

But the contradiction is only apparent, since, as the commentators point out, Jesus is not talking about death by the sword, or death in a natural calamity when He says “perish in the same way, but of dying ‘unprepared’ so to speak, of dying without having repented, turned to God and become reconciled to Him.

But there is more – as is usually the case with what Jesus has to say. This is much more than a reflection on the need to be spiritually prepared to meet our Maker. Note that Jesus doesn't even deal with what would be *our* central concern – making sense of these deaths, explaining away what we perceive to be something fundamentally unjust and arbitrary. In fact, He brushes that concern aside – as if for Him, it were not an important question. So Jesus here is implicitly critiquing the way we read events such as these, how we interpret to ourselves what goes on in the world – and he zeros in specifically on what meanings we ascribe to the fact of death. We are forced, then to consider how the world's understanding of death differs from what Jesus is implying here.

We humans (a.k.a. ‘the world’) have always found it difficult to make sense of the fact of death, to fit death into any coherent system of logic and meaning. This poses a serious problem since deep down at some level we all suspect that if death is a meaningless accident, then so is life. Since this is unacceptable to most humans, it is not surprising that making death meaningful is a quest to which all human cultures have devoted a tremendous amount of energy. In fact, one could say that human cultures are organized around systems of belief or ideologies that seek to give meaning to life by making sense of death. It is in this way that death gains dominion over us. Such, scripture tells us, is life in a fallen world.

This is true of all human cultures, but the problem is especially acute in what we call the modern West. Scientific rationalism, which is our primary framework for making sense of reality, and which absolutely rejects any notion of the transcendence, can only note the fact of death, it can assign it no meaning. Hence we “moderns” don't really know what to do about death. Generally, we try to ignore it, and if we can't, to avoid it, to attempt, as

the theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it, “to get out of this life alive”. This explains our growing cultural aversion in Western countries to funerals, and our frenetic obsession with youth and health. But at the same, since we still regard death as mystery that possesses the key to the meaning of the life it denies, we continue to search for causes or institutions that we can believe are worth ‘dying for’ since dying for whatever – a cause, a nation, an institution - gives meaning to the death, and hence to life itself.

Unfortunately, a cause worth dying for is also a cause worth killing for – the point is, after all, the sacrifice – and so this bondage to death results in more deaths and more oppressive bondage..

This is the cycle that Jesus came to free us from. Death is not a determining factor for Him, and in today’s gospel He is, in fact, not talking about death at all: He’s talking about Life. About a new and unending Life, not lived in the shadow of death; a life where death has lost its sting and no longer has dominion over us. His disciples of course, couldn’t fully comprehend this at the time, it is only in the light of the resurrection that His words here take on their full meaning. It is only in this resurrection light that we can let go of our obsession with death and live a life rooted in a God who is Himself life.

This in no way involves an avoidance of death; indeed it involves a very frank acceptance of death’s inevitability. Remember that we’re at a point in Luke’s gospel where Jesus has already set his face towards Jerusalem. He is in other words, on His way to His own death which will establish the meaning of all death. His death and resurrection will show us that it is life that gives meaning to death, and not, as the world would have it, the other way around. The world, deep down, believes that we die into the nothingness from which we came: Christ proclaims that we die into the Life that called us forth from the nothing in the first place.

All this is to say that when Jesus calls us to repent, He means something significantly more than simply toting up our sins and failures and saying we’re sorry. He’s calling us to think and behave in a way that is radically opposed to the world’s way. Repentance – μετανοία – has, in fact, little to do with being sorry and everything to do with a change of

heart, a change of perspective, a new set of criteria by which to interpret and understand the world.

Repentance, then, is not something we can do all at once or on our own. It is a process that begins with baptism and continues throughout the rest of our lives, in the context of the community God called into being for the purpose of providing a space for it to take place: the Church. And it is to repent, in that sense, that we gather here once a week, to commemorate and celebrate Christ's Death into Life by which he freed us from the bondage to death that grips this fallen world.

What this means, I think, in terms of the tragic events that got me started on this meditation in the first place, is not that we should ignore death - indeed, we should take it very seriously - but that we should not, as Christians, allow death to determine what we do or how we react. As we see it - as we are learning to see it - those who perished in this terrible tragedy are in good hands: we lament their deaths because of the pain it has brought to others. The victims themselves, however, are getting on with their lives and need no further assistance from us except, perhaps, our prayers. They certainly don't need other lives to be sacrificed to avenge their murder. It is in this light that I understand our Lord's rather harsh injunction to 'let the dead bury the dead'. I read it as 'commend their souls to God and get on with your real task, which is the proclamation of the Kingdom of Christ, who is the Lord of Life.

So, let us do just that, this morning. Let us commend the souls of those who have died in this terrible incident - and the souls of all who have died in acts of random terror - to the merciful care of the living God and, for ourselves, let us pray for the courage, the strength and the opportunity to proclaim the Good News of the Risen Christ to a world in desperate need of redemption.