



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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Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 14:8-18
Second Reading Revelation 21:22-22:5
Gospel John 14:23-29

Alex Aronis, the pastor of Union Church here in Manila, and I belong to the same health club. That means that we get to compare notes from time to time as we work out. I get to hear how Union is getting so big that they're thinking of adding yet another service. I respond with comments about the weather. Size, after all, *isn't everything*. And it doesn't help that Pastor Alex is more than ten years older than I am and in much better shape. Size does matter in some things, I'm afraid.

This week we were comparing what we would be preaching on this morning. He shared that he was going to use the Gospel text that suggests that many people claim to love the Lord, but do not follow his commandments. As he spoke, I took mental notes of how I would use his ideas with a distinctly "Trinity" spin.

But in fact, as I re-read the lessons chosen for today in light of events in the world, it was the reading from Revelation that most haunted me, words about an ideal world where the righteous live in the presence of God and receive their reward for having been faithful to him throughout lives of courageous witness to what is true and what is good.

You see, I have been angry this week: angry at being powerless in a world of evil; angry at claiming to believe in humankind's potential for goodness, kindness, even holiness, while at the same time having to watch the spectacle of a national election on the one hand (and about which I can say very little until it is clearer just what happened), and the scandal of the Iraqi prisoners on the other (about which I intend to speak). The sum total of them both has meant that it hasn't been a good week for our side: the side of the human race.

The passage from Revelation speaks to us about life in the paradise of the world to come. It says that access to this place will be restricted, not by virtue of denomination or class or income, but of character and of faith: "...Nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." We are, in other words, given a glowing description of what human beings *could* be like, while the newscasts do the job of telling us what they *really are*.

Who is righteous anymore? Who are the "good guys" when the good guys go bad-when those held up to us as perhaps the last heroes we have are shown to be capable of inhuman acts of denigration. I have read accounts of parents trying to explain to their children why it was American faces seen doing the acts on TV and in the press, and not those who they had come to recognize as "the enemy." Blame the media for showing it; blame the officers for tolerating it, blame the Arabs for exploiting it: blame somebody, anybody, so that justice can be done and we can show that "our system" works.

The problem is that "our system" is the one already calling the shots in Iraq and has been for the year since the fall of the Hussein regime. Something is terribly, terribly wrong, and the "system", if you want to call it that, is flawed to the degree that such base instincts can be indulged, enjoyed and even photographed. Some of those accused have said that they were only following orders. One famous radio commentator in the States said that they were just having a good time, like a fraternity initiation. I was briefly in a fraternity in college and saw how they treated one another. I'm not sure which is worse, really. And I am angry, and I am frightened.

I am angry because I don't know what to tell our young people about the role of religion in their lives if the ones who are supposed to be championing our Western Christian values are seen to be doing such things. I am angry that we have come to the point where it can be said, "but the other side does far worse." That equation is an admission of defeat in my book.

But you know why I am *frightened*? It's because those soldiers reminded me that I might be capable of just such barbarism if given the chance. Does that surprise you? Does it shock? It shouldn't. Given the right circumstances, the right encouragement, and the fear of retribution if an order is refused, it has been proved that even the most mild-mannered and compassionate of persons can reveal a very feral and wicked side. There, but for the grace of God, go I.

It is that *grace*, you see, which acts not only to inspire and encourage us, but also to restrain us: keeping us from doing what we know we are capable of, helping us to choose *not* to do it. It is the reason for that mysterious phrase in the Lord's Prayer that asks that we not be led into temptation or the time of trial. We are admitting the overwhelming power that exists within the human being to inflict pain, humiliation and shame upon others, and asking that God intervene.

What is the Good News in all of this? What encouragement can we glean from the Scriptures during this bumper of a week? It's there, believe me, and it's found in the account of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. We read that the Lord Jesus was just as familiar with the kind of pointless sadism and hypocrisy and sin in his day as we are in ours, and we are told that he had several responses.

He got *angry*, and overturned a franchise grown cynical and tired as he wrecked havoc in the Temple. He got *sad*, as he wept over Jerusalem that killed the prophets send to save it. But most of all, he just *loved*: loved people quite literally to death. And when he left this earth, he turned over the whole enterprise of his new movement, a movement of compassion and truth and witness, to the same human race that had so hated and abused him, and he told them: get on with the work. He

knew we could, against all odds, because he had died and risen again to let it work and to show us that there is a *choice*.

Our response to evil, even spectacular evil, can be many things, but not all of them will be true to the mind of Christ. Being true to the mind of Christ will most probably begin with simple things, doable things. The Lord Jesus never said to save the world by running for office or conquering a country. He did say that salvation lay in watching a single, innocent death on a Cross and then making sure that that was the last necessary act of inhumanity to be made. And we have ignored that to our peril not only in the great theaters of war and politics, but in the privacy of our homes, our offices, our marriages, our families, our participation in everything human around us. When we choose to do the cruel thing, the degrading thing, the hurtful thing, we perpetuate the evil we say we hate. When we choose compassion, forgiveness and restraint, we have chosen the mind of Christ. Isn't that ridiculously simple? Yes it is, and that it is so seldom tried is the most ridiculous of all. Pastor Aronis will be preaching on the Gospel text today, but then so did I. It reads: "Those who do not love me do not keep my word." That's what Jesus said. And his word is *Love*.