

Sunday: Palm Sunday, Cycle C, 3.20.16
 Scripture: Is 50:4-7/Phil 2:6-11/Lk 22:14-23:56

THE INNOCENT
DO NOT SUFFER ALONE

The innocent who suffer are at the heart of Luke's Passion narrative, as they are throughout his Gospel... as they are throughout the world. Only two weeks ago on March 4th, a team of gunmen in the port city of Aden in Yemen unleashed a massacre at a retirement home for the sick and elderly run by Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity. The four gunmen entered the facility housing 80 elderly, on the pretext that they wanted to visit their mothers at the facility. The gunmen moved from room to room, handcuffing their sixteen victims before shooting them -- a guard, several workers and four Sisters of Charity. One of the martyred nuns, Sister Anselm, was from India; the other three were from Africa: Sisters Margherite and Reginette from Rwanda and Sister Judith from Kenya.



Only one sister survived. She hid inside a kitchen storeroom after hearing a Yemeni guard shouting "Run! Run!" Sr. Sally sent this handwritten letter describing the massacre to her superiors. Her letter corroborates the anti-Christian motivation behind the attack, and reports that the terrorists smashed and destroyed all the religious articles they could find: the tabernacle, altar, crucifix, statues, Bibles and prayer books. She reported that a neighbor saw the terrorists abduct a priest who had been living at the institute, Salesian Father

Tom Uzhunnalil, taking him away in their car. Sr. Sally's letter is a Passion narrative no less devastating than the gospel story we just heard. The sufferings of the innocent are played out in a thousand ways every day. And not only in such dramatic and devastating ways.

The sixth grade girl who is ostracized by her classmates because she isn't part of the "in group;" the soldier with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) who returns from the Middle East and is abandoned by the country he served; the mom who bears the burden of peer pressure in an affluent community that rejects those who don't conform or look the part. Their tears, like those of Jesus in the garden, fall to the ground like drops of blood.



Luke, in his Passion story, takes great pains to affirm Jesus' innocence. Pilate said twice: *I find this man not guilty*. Herod refused to condemn Jesus. The thief on the cross rebukes his fellow criminal who taunts Jesus saying of him: *This man has done nothing criminal*. And finally, after Jesus died on the cross, the centurion, an official police guard, makes the strongest affirmation: *This man was innocent beyond doubt*. Holy Week, beginning today with Palm Sunday, confronts us with the most ancient question human beings have ever faced: "Why do the innocent suffer?" Our prayer, and the prayer of the Church, does not, cannot give us an answer. We must live with that question as all people have from the beginning of time, and all people will until the end of time.



What our prayer can do is bring us comfort, compassion and courage. We can take **comfort** in our own struggles knowing that Jesus walked the way of suffering before us. *Though he was in the form of God... he humbled himself, becoming obedient even to death on the cross.* When you are in pain, no matter what its source, turn to the cross of Christ. Our Lord is with you to comfort you. He was not abandoned by God; Jesus will not allow us to be abandoned in our times of need.

Our prayer can help us to be **compassionate**. We can choose not to allow suffering to make us bitter. In the midst of his own passion Jesus healed the severed ear of the high priest's servant. He did not rebuke his disciples for falling asleep during the garden watch. He told the women of Jerusalem not to weep for him but to be concerned for themselves. From the cross he prayed that God would forgive his executioners and he promised paradise to the repentant thief. Don't let your own difficulties block the grace of God at work within you, or darken your inner spirit.

Finally, our prayer can give us **courage**. Even though the authorities knew that Jesus was innocent, they ignored the truth and gave him over to the clamor of the crowds and the violence of the mob. The prayer of this week we call Holy offers us the grace to stand with the innocent. Those in authority, whether they be congressmen or clergy, generals or bishops, executives or judges, do not have a corner on the truth.

They do not always act out of justice, but often from self-interest and self-preservation. God's grace urges us to be the voice of the voiceless and to defend the innocent who cannot defend themselves.



In imitating Christ's mercy, in taking up his work of reconciliation, in receiving his comfort, reflecting his compassion and acting out of his courage, we profess our faith in the power of his death and the promise of his resurrection. With Christ we can walk the way of the cross, going with him in the dark corners of life where despair seems to hold sway; wherever the innocent are abused or the needy are neglected; wherever the question of innocent suffering is posed – not to give an answer, but to give ourselves -- with Christ -- as people of faith who are willing to empty our lives for the sake of the gospel and the salvation of our world.

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