

B Lent I

St. Stephen's, Belvedere

February 22, 2015

Martyrs and Environmentalists

Before reflecting on the Holy Scriptures appointed for this first Sunday in lent, I think it important that we not pass by but pause to reflect upon a significant item in the news with direct relevance for Christian faith. I am referring to the recent martyrdom of 21 Egyptian Christians whose lives were required of them for no other reason than that they were Christian and who were ritually executed at the edge of the Libyan sea.

The image has become familiar to anyone paying attention to the news. It depicts a procession of orange suited bound prisoners each in the hand of black robed, sword wielding executioner, each of whom at a signal and a blasphemous cry of "God is great!" beheads his charge and stains red the sea that laps also the shores of Europe.

The 21 murdered men were reportedly migrant workers who to support their families in Egypt sought work in neighboring Libya where they were swept up and imprisoned by a brutal sect intent on using a theatrical performance of ritual murder to chill the hearts of all those they brand as "infidels." (That would include you and me.)

As people of faith and especially as fellow Christians who wish to deepen our faith, it is worth taking notice and pondering the implications of such savagery for our faith and for our world.

This morning as we baptized Christians gather for our Sunday worship we do so at the outset of a period of 40 days set aside annually for examination and deepening our own personal experience of faith. At such a moment, what does the blood witness of these 21 coreligionists have to say to us?

If the usual pattern held true, each of these 21 individuals was given the opportunity to save his skin by renouncing his faith. Evidently a choice was made by each of these people not to do so. Apparently each man chose instead to steadfastly cling to his faith in Jesus Christ and his communion with his Christian family and community.

In the first centuries of the church, as well as in other times and other places of persecution, captured Christians were given a similar choice: to renounce their faith, or die—sometimes through horrible torture.

I don't know how it is with you, but when I encounter such examples I find myself forced to consider the authenticity, or lack thereof, of my own faith. To what extent is my alleged Christian faith not merely a cultural accretion but rather such a core part of my being and my identity that to renounce it would be to deny who I am—and make it meaningless to go on living?

Perhaps you are familiar with the old query: if you were arrested and accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

This may be a good koan for lent, as we enter into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection—and of our own.

Let us pause for a moment of reflection before we offer prayer for those who have died. ...

“Almighty and everliving God, you hate nothing that you have made and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent: receive into the arms of your mercy the souls of our brothers whose earthly lives were taken from them on account of their faith in you. Give succor to their families and loved ones who will never see them again on this side of heaven.

May their blood witness to their faith in you have effect on the hearts of those who wantonly murdered them and stay their hands from further evil deeds.

Grant that their witness may also not be lost on us, but that we might in their faith and courage be strengthened in our own.

Amen.

Well—now for the sermon!

--Actually not another sermon—just a one-pointed response to the first reading this morning, from the book of beginnings, of Genesis.

“God said to Noah: As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you (that's us) and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. “(I always wondered: did Noah take fish onto the ark, or were the fish left on their own in flood???)

“This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

This is a covenant with a planet—not just a covenant with one of its myriad species, not just with human kind, but with ALL the living creatures upon the earth and with the planet itself.

This reading this morning calls our speciesism to account—our thinking and acting as if homo sapiens are the only race that matters—and not also the carrier pigeons and polar bears and honey bees and rapidly dwindling pelagic fishes of the world's oceans and so on

For God has made a covenant not just with Jews—at this time Jews had not even been invented yet. God has made a covenant not just with human beings—but rather with “every living creature of all flesh.”

The huge rainbow flag that flutters famously over the intersection of Castro and Market streets has become a global emblem of inclusion of diverse peoples. However the rainbow covenant of the Creator described in Genesis Chapter Nine is broader still—For it includes all the species of the planet—even those which have not yet been discovered and identified by human scientists.

As this gold ring worn upon the finger is the sign of a covenant between the wearer and a particular other human being, so the bow in the clouds is the sign of a covenant between God and “every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.”

Today’s Prayer of the Day for the First Sunday in Lent references “us who are assaulted by many temptations.” Is it possible that one temptation by which we are assaulted is the temptation to ignore the inconvenient truth that the Creator’s providential covenant is not merely with human beings but rather includes all the creatures of the earth?

AND that therefore we are to take into account in our personal actions and our policy decisions their impact on all our fellow creatures?

I’m just asking....

We are living at a moment in California when the threat we feel is of a drought rather than of a flood—but long term, this may not be true.

If we human beings have a special role to play in the Creator’s scheme of things perhaps it is as stewards of this covenant on behalf of all our fellow creatures—perhaps rather Noah-like. For from the beginning we were given dominion- not domination, but caring dominion—over all things.

How are we doing? I’m not sure that our report card in the 21st century is anything that we can brag about. How will our grandchildren rate our efforts to preserve the earth and “all living creatures of flesh”?

Perhaps we are in the position of Noah on the ark: still trying to figure out how we can all live together.

One thing for sure is, that the rainbow is a sign of God’s over-arching providence and promise of protection for all the earth and not just for us. It is important that we live accordingly.