

CHRIST'S COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS

Pentecost 7 2006 Dr Brian Porter

Jeremiah 23: Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture

Ephesians 2: Jesus has abolished the law...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two

Matthew 6: Jesus had compassion for them

May I speak in the name of Jesus, the compassionate one, the prince of peace.

We would be hard-hearted indeed if our hearts did not bleed this morning for Lebanon and the whole Middle East. The Archbishop of Canterbury has sent a letter to the Christian leaders of Lebanon acknowledging that this is an ancient Christian country with a witness stretching back over two millennia:

Today as thousand of passport-holders are evacuated from Beirut, I am only too conscious of those, from all communities, who have no place of refuge from the violence that has been unleashed...I have been alarmed at the spiral of violence, the vicious circle of attack and retaliation, that has developed over the last few days. My prayers and sympathy are with the principal victims, the innocent civilians on both sides of the border, who now live in terror and are powerless to prevent the collective suffering at the hands of Hezbollah and the Israeli military.

This morning's *New York Times* has as its lead story this chilling and indeed sickening item:

US SPEEDS UP BOMB DELIVERY FOR THE ISRAELIS

The Bush administration is rushing a delivery of precision guided bombs to Israel. The decision quickly to ship the weapons to Israel with relatively little debate within the Bush administration is compared to Iran's efforts to arm and re-supply Hezbollah.

St John's has for years housed an organization called *Compassionate Friends*. It has been a fitting accommodation to a witness to which we all are called as Christians. I focus this morning on two compassionate friends of Jesus whose example should inspire us all.

Father Damien of Molokai:

Fr Damien was a Belgian priest who went as a missionary in 1873 to the Hawaiian island of Molokai which had a leper colony of 600 poor souls who were literally rotting away and were visited only occasionally by a priest. He decided that he was called to live amongst the lepers, working indefatigably to improve their living conditions, baptising many and introducing lovely music to their liturgy. So for 16 years he lived amongst his people. He was their doctor, their priest, their builder, their carpenter, their policeman, their grave-digger and undertaker, as well as their loving pastor. One day, putting his foot into hot water, and failing to feel that it was hot, he knew that the slow contagion of leprosy had caught up with him. His sermon in chapel that Sunday began: "Now I too am

one of you”. Fr Damien died a leper in 1889 and was buried on Molokai amongst his people as their compassionate friend and of course as a compassionate friend of Jesus. Ironically his statue stands in the US Congress as Hawaii’s contribution to the 50 representative statues provided by the American States to honour a significant representative of their State.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador:

He began his life as an obedient seminarian sent to Rome for training. Then rising through the hierarchy, he was chosen to be a bishop as a defender of the institutional church and a docile citizen in a country where fourteen wealthy families rule the lives of some five million powerless peasants. He never rocked the boat until a friend was murdered by the corrupt military government. This turned the pious conformist into a fiery prophet who at once cancelled every parish mass in the country and asked his people to gather in the cathedral. There he denounced the evil system, galvanising his people and putting their brutal government on notice. He said:

If they ever take our radio, suspend our newspaper, silence us, put to death all of us priests, bishop included – a people without priests – then each of you will have to be God’s microphone. The church will always exist as long as one baptised person is left alive!

To stave off the inevitable revolution, the Salvadoran government tried everything to intimidate Archbishop Romero, but everything failed. Even the Pope would not support his bishop. One morning as this brave man held up the chalice at mass, a sniper’s bullet in a government initiated assassination got him, the Archbishop’s blood mixing with the Blood of Christ in the cup as he fell at the altar. Along with those other modern martyrs, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Fr Maximilian Kolbe and Archbishop Luwum of Uganda, Archbishop Oscar Romero is one for whom the trumpets sound on the other side.

So we have these are two graphic images of Christ’s compassionate friends against the current backdrop of Lebanon: Fr Damien’s foot in hot water, and Archbishop Oscar Romero’s blood co-mingling in the chalice at his last mass.

I leave you with one more image: it is that of the Corpus Christi image of the mother pelican vulning her breast with her beak to feed her young with her own blood when fish food is scarce. I have carried this around in my head all my life since I was a boy who loved his old parish priest crippled with arthritic gout who nevertheless shuffled each day in pain to the altar and recited a Latin prayer before communion which I have always said to myself when making my communion. The prayer goes like this:

*Pie pelicane, Jesu Domine:
me immundum munda tuo sanguine,
et te adore per saecula saeculorum.*

*Jesu, holy pelican:
May I be immersed in thy blood
And adore you for ever*

In comfortable Camberwell, so far from Lebanon and the Holy Land, where we never hear the sound of bombs dropping or gunfire, where we are safe in our beds at night, we nevertheless face and cannot ignore the insistent calling to be Christ's compassionate friends and work sacrificially for peace and justice.

Amen