

Sermon "Remember Your Saintliness"
Sunday, November 6, 2011
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Church, Shaker Heights
All Saints Day Year A: 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Last Sunday our Israel pilgrimage group landed at Newark Liberty airport after a long twelve-hour flight from Tel Aviv. Because of the Nor'easter that hit the New York region the day before our flight had already been delayed three hours. Couple the long flight and the delay with our having awakened in Jerusalem that day at 5 am Israeli time and that we still had hopes of catching the 8:15 pm connecting flight to Cleveland and you can begin to imagine how tired, stressed and anxious we pilgrims were.

Before making that connecting Cleveland flight we still had to pass through U.S. Immigration and Customs. The immigration officer who I encountered was a pleasant young man in his thirties who, as he read my passport, asked me what I did for a living. "I'm a priest," I replied, and then for clarification added, "Episcopal." "Really?" he said. And then he asked me a question which I heard as, "who is the shortest person in the Bible?" Okay, so call me crazy but encountering an immigration officer who wants to administer a Bible content quiz to a jet-lagged, tired, foggy-brained and stressed out American citizen is not what I was expecting to encounter as I re-entered the country. But God is good. Our group had just visited Jericho where the Gospel tells us Jesus encountered a man named Zacchaeus, who was not only a chief tax collector but also was described as being very short, in fact so short that he had to climb a Sycamore tree in order to see Jesus amidst the throngs of people who surrounded him.

"Zacchaeus," I replied, with a note of triumph! The officer smiled, "actually I asked what was the shortest verse in the Bible?" he said. "Oh," I replied. "I thought you said shortest person." I had the answer to this question in the bag. "Jesus wept," I said. "Right," he said as he smiled at me and stamped my passport.

During this past week I have been processing our pilgrimage adventure in the context of the feast of All Saints Day which was this past Tuesday and which we celebrate again today on All Saints Sunday. In that processing, that shortest sentence in the Bible, "Jesus wept" has repeatedly entered my thoughts.

There were many things that we pilgrims encountered during our time in the Holy Land that were beautiful, fun, educational, spiritual, fascinating and deeply moving. Yet there were also a number of things we encountered that I can't help but believe have caused and continue to cause Jesus to weep; things that cause our Savior to weep because of how tragic they are and how they have been and continue to be obstacles to building up God's Kingdom in the world.

Our itinerary last week Friday offers a poignant example of what I mean.

That morning we visited Yad vaShem, the Israel Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. In Hebrew Yad vaShem means “place and a name.” This memorial gives a place and a name to those six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazi and their accomplices during the Second World War. Yad vaShem is a sacred place. It is also gut wrenching. And for me the most gut wrenching place at Yad vaShem is the Children’s Memorial that was built to provide a name and a place to the 1.5 million children who perished in the Holocaust.

One enters this building on a ramp like sidewalk that descends slowly and then enters a totally dark space where you first encounter six over-sized black and white photographs of the children who perished. These faces are representative of all the children who died. Some appear to have been among the assimilated Jews of Western Europe and others Orthodox Jews from the shetls of Eastern Europe. Moving further along one enters a vast darkened hall that is illumined by seemingly thousands of candles that appear to be suspended in the air. Like the stars in the night sky, they seem to stretch into infinity. A soft voice alternating between that of a male and a female every few minutes, gently utters the name of a child who was murdered. It is the necrology of the dead.

My stomach clenched as I walked through the hall and out into the bright sunlight. “How,” I thought “is the murder of one child because of their religion even possible by anyone for any reason, never mind 1.5 million children?”

Later that afternoon our group visited Bethlehem to see to the Church of the Nativity. Bethlehem is part of the Palestinian autonomy, which means it is not a part of Israel. It is also a city that is separated from Israel by what we know as “the wall” and what the Israeli’s call the security or separation barrier. The wall is 26 feet tall, built of concrete and topped with barbed wire. At entry points between Israel and the West Bank the wall is a double wall with metal barriers, fences, locked doors, cage gates and security personnel that one needs to pass through on both sides. The wall makes Bethlehem feel like a prison and for the Palestinian residents it is a prison. One would need to be blind to not observe the very different and harsher treatment that Arabs trying to cross into Israel received, from the treatment that we American, Germans, Russians and other nationals visiting Bethlehem for religious or tourist purposes received. Yet even we were closely scrutinized.

As we stood in line to return to our bus in Israel it became clear to me that our group was experiencing heightened anxiety. Standing, waiting one by one in a narrow passage with a curved fence on top, between two walls, preparing to pass through an automatically locked cage door with a blinking red and green light and the stern faced security guard checking passports would un-nerve anyone. As the intentional last

person in line, I was aware of my own heightened anxiety as I stood alone for a moment as the person before me went through the gate, left alone waiting for my turn to exit this prison. Once again my stomach clenched and I felt beads of perspiration on my brow.

Jesus has wept and Jesus weeps over the six million Jews exterminated because of who they were - his own people - people that Yad vaShem remembers. Jesus weeps over the hundreds of thousands of people imprisoned by the Security Wall; people who have been placed in economic despair and robbed of their dignity by that security barrier. Jesus weeps over the deaths of Israelis' caused by Palestinian terrorists that led Israel to believe that a wall dividing, separating and imprisoning people was the only solution to solve that problem. Jesus weeps.

I speak of these things in the Holy Land on All Saints Sunday because this feast is meant not only to honor those who have by their lives been exemplary witnesses to the way of life God calls us to, but because this feast is also meant to remind us of our own call to saintliness; our call to roll model God's Kingdom life.

Holocausts and walls that imprison and divide are a result of we humans forgetting our own call to saintliness; those times when we forget our own sacredness and the sacredness of others as people made in the image of God.

In the first letter of John we heard, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."

When we do not know God, when we fail to believe that we are – each of us - sacred children of God made in God's image, evil gains entry into our lives and uses us for the most nefarious acts imaginable; acts that lead to holocaust, terrorism, walls and much more.

Today I call upon you to remember your own call to saintliness. As we baptize baby Zenon Sebastiano let us see in his innocence and purity the child of God each one of us are. As we baptize him, let us in our Baptismal Vows commit to work for a better world for him and for all our children. What a tribute that would be from us to those 1.5 million who died in the Holocaust.

The evil that encompasses the world can at times seem over-whelming. We think, "what can I do to combat the evil that enslaves us and the evil done on our behalf?" Yet evil cringes each and every time we counter it with love, no matter how small a gesture that love may seem to be. God has given us each the power to love. Imagine speaking up in love to the bullying of our children in school. Imagine if we raised the voice of love to mean spirited behaviors and jokes, to hateful speech, thinly veiled racism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism and all the sick isms of the world. Imagine if we

responded in love to those slights and slurs that fill our daily discourse. Imagine lifting the voice of love to the abuse of the weak and the young and the vulnerable that plagues the world.

My sisters and brothers evil cowers and is diminished when it encounters love. Evil hates love. And most importantly Jesus no longer weeps but laughs with joy as the Kingdom is built by our love. In that love we can hear Jesus voice telling us, Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you are being filled.

"Blessed are you the merciful, for you are receiving mercy.

"Blessed are you in the purity of your heart, for you are seeing God.

"Blessed are you being a peacemaker, for you truly are children of God."

Today remember your own saintliness and your being a child of God and let your love build the Kingdom of the world's salvation.

Amen.