

Last Monday I had a first look at the lectionary readings for today, and was considering that the theme for this Sunday might be about

*Moral courage is always in short supply. It is the fashion to keep our heads down and go with the herd; but this is not the way to follow Christ.*

I was reflecting on the idea that Jesus might be saying to us that he wanted “rugged” Christians with fire in their bellies to get on with his work. Whatever the trials of life or whatever dissention came our way. My wife’s flight was cancelled when we woke to take her to the airport at 4am on Tuesday and we faced the inconvenience of rearranging family life both here and in England. Oh, just get on with it!! The fact that we had no sleep because of the gales on Sunday night, and very little last night was just too bad!!

Then all hell let loose on Tuesday, and by Tuesday night we were stood on the veranda of the parsonage watching the flames just behind us and the wind blowing burning as into the garden, and wondering if Holy Trinity Church was to be lost on my watch! How on earth had the fire jumped the Ribeiro missed out half the town and landed in Sao Pedro across the wall!

### **Shared stories of randomness:**

Helen (not her real name) suffered random violence on a train which changed her life

Fr Jacques Hamel in Rouen

The slaughter of 19 disabled people in a Japanese care facility

The terrorism of nature

### **TRAGEDY!**

**"If a single person dies in front of you, it is a tragedy. If a million people die on the other side of the earth, it is a statistic." --Josef Stalin**

***"I've never thought of my characters as being sad. On the contrary, they are full of life. They didn't choose tragedy. Tragedy chose them."***

*Juliette Binoche*

***"I have spent more than half a lifetime trying to express the tragic moment."*** --*Marcel Marceau*

We use the word Tragedy to describe our response to these horrors which leave us speechless, at a total loss to explain the randomness and gratuity of evil in the world. From the perspective of the Christian faith, however, none of this is really a tragedy at all.

**The classical definition comes from Aristotle:**

***"Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play . . . through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."***

*--Aristotle, The Poetics.*

It's an art form that moves audiences and grants them a psychological cleansing, especially of fear and pity. Watching tragedy, Aristotle thought, could give spectators practice in exercising pity toward others who suffer in actual life. And it could train us to suppress fear when disaster strikes too close.

Classical Greek writers thought that facing tragedy was a healthy and necessary antidote to human foolishness. It taught humans to know themselves in a way comedy could not.

Likewise, the Romantic poets and later Victorian viewers valued tragedy as an emotional exercise helping viewers learn compassion. Watching people suffer on stage could help the audience sympathize with another's pain.

But one of the ancient pioneers of Christian thought, Augustine of Hippo, made a different argument. In his famous Confessions, he wrote about going to the theatre as an adolescent and weeping over theatrical tragedies. As an adult, he came to regret this waste of emotional energy on a purely staged "reality." He scorned himself for succumbing to emotional voyeurism,

enjoying his feeling of pity for the characters experiencing misfortune as well as the satisfaction that it was not happening to him.

Perhaps some of our own experience of viewing sketches and paintings produced by individuals living through the Holocaust for example, or watching our television screens every evening, resonates with Augustine's reflections.

Augustine advised Christians to expend their emotional energy rather more wisely (and benevolently) on those suffering in real life, cultivating authentic forms of Christian mercy that left artificial pity in the dust.

For Christians, "tragedy" cannot truly capture the meaning of the random acts of violence. Tragedy, at least in the classical sense, constrains us to an art form that moves us emotionally, even intellectually, but not necessarily practically and transformatively. It hardly delivers any final reason that moral atrocities and horrific suffering infect our existence.

Perhaps the Christian gospel's answer to the tragic dimension of human existence can only be grasped by contemplating God's own "abandonment" of his Son to that tragic reality, with the crucifixion as the ultimate epitome of God's solidarity with suffering humanity. In the shadow of the cross, the death of Father Hamel, for Christians, is not tragedy, but it is indeed tragic.

Our Christian faith calls us to find something deeper than sympathy or pity. We need to bring a sense of authentic mercy and reach out to the victims of tragic suffering, keeping alive the memory of those whose tragic deaths appear utterly senseless. But Christians are also called to exercise that faith which is aligned with resolute hope and unrelenting love, enacting an alternative vision of the reconciliation of all humanity to the God who gave up his own Son as a "soft target."

"Tragedy is more important than love. Out of all human events, it is tragedy alone that brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' suffering. Tragedy occurs in human lives so that we will learn to reach out and comfort others" -- C. S. Lewis

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to persevere in our life of faith: *“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us”*

The epistle writer wants us to picture ourselves as athletes in an arena. As we strive toward our goal, to finish with faith, in peace and holiness, we run surrounded by people. The people in the stands are people who have demonstrated faith — faith that persevered, people who by the grace of God overcame great obstacles, and finished the race.

They are witnesses, not just spectators. There is a huge difference. A spectator watches you go through something. A witness is someone who has gone through something herself, and the root meaning of the word witness, from which we get the word “martyr,” is someone who may have given his life going through it. We have witnesses cheering us on, not just spectators, people who have gone through what we struggle with, people whose testimonies of the strength God gave them can, in turn, give us strength and courage. We have witnesses rooting for us, weeping with us when we stumble, calling to us when we wander, urging us to finish the race.

Believe in The Community of Saints!!