

Circle of Violence

Matthew 5:38-48

Remembrance Sunday

7th November 2010

If you think it's hard being a Christian in Canada today, just think how much more difficult it is for Christians in Iraq. Last Sunday, while we were worshipping peacefully here in St. Paul's, all hell was letting loose in a Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad. During the service at Our Lady of Salvation Church, a group of Al Qaeda militants stormed the church, killing two priests and 39 worshippers, wounding dozens of others, as well as taking more than half the congregation hostage.

It's rather sad that, in a country where Christians have lived and worshipped since the 1st century, so many thousands have been forced to flee in the past few years. And there seems to be no let-up in the violence against Christians. In a recent posting on the internet, the Islamic extremists said that bombing and assassination attacks against Christians would continue. Just think what it would be like if this was the challenge we were facing rather than our Canadian problem of secularization and dwindling congregations.

Reacting to these catastrophic events in Iraq, Father Raymond de Souza, parish priest of Sacred Heart of Mary Parish on Wolfe Island, near Kingston, Ontario, said this week in an article in the *National Post* that:

"The blood of Baghdad screams out to heaven and earth ... what happened last Sunday was so utterly horrific that it merits special, and thunderous, condemnation, backed up with lethal force if necessary ... The blood on the altar makes it clear. No amount of goodwill, no amount of dialogue, no amount of circumlocutory evasions, no amount of supine prostrations – nothing will dissuade the jihadists.

"So let us not [indulge in useless denial concerning]¹ the dead bodies of our fallen brethren in Christ. Let us speak frankly of those who want to kill us. Allahu Akbar – God is great! So those Catholics on Sunday heard the jihadists shout in the church. Can there be any greater sacrilege than to kill the innocent at prayer, while shouting that God is great? The jihadists respect neither man nor God, not even their own. They have killed their fellow Muslims and bombed mosques. The Christians killed on Sunday were Iraqis, their fellow Arabs, their fellow citizens, their neighbours. They kill because they are seized with a murderous hatred. The least we can do is to summon a righteous anger in return.

"The Christian always hopes for conversion and offers forgiveness. There must also be justice and prudence, and prudence demands that those who would kill in the name of God are best despatched quickly to their judgment. Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. So

Scripture teaches us, and so it must be for us, leaving vengeance to the Lord, and imploring the grace of conversion and reconciliation. But let us not blanch from raising our voices to the Lord, with righteous anger and hot tears, that He might visit His vengeance upon those who did this, bring down His wrath upon their heads and exact upon them a terrifying justice in full measure."²

Now, I think that most of us would totally agree with these words of Father de Souza as he calls for righteous anger and natural justice. But what concerns me is that, while he stops short of recommending that there be a campaign of reprisal for this heinous crime, nevertheless he does call for God to exact revenge. And, since God works his purposes in this world through those people whom he chooses to act on his behalf, ultimately Father De Souza is advocating human vengeance.

Oh, how we human beings love revenge! We love when we ourselves get even. And we love to hear of other people righting a wrong.

A small, mild-mannered truck driver was eating in a truck stop one day when three mean-looking bikers walked in. The first strolled up to the little man, stubbed out his cigarette in his pie and sat down next to him at the counter. The second biker walked up to the truck driver, spat in his coffee and then sat down next to him at the counter. The third biker walked up, turned over the man's plate, and also took a seat at the counter. Without saying anything, the little fellow stood up, sighed, and then walked meekly out of the diner. Shortly afterwards, one of the bikers smirked and said to the waitress, "Wasn't much of a man, was he?" The waitress replied, "Not much of a truck driver either. He just backed up his big-rig over three motorcycles parked at the door!"³

Oh, how we love to hear of someone paying someone back! But the problem with seeking retribution is always, of course, that, though it seems like the right thing to do at the time, though our very beings cry out for a settling of scores and a righting of an imbalance, yet it never solves anything.

When the flames of vengeance are fanned on the world stage, for instance, it simply fosters the culture of savagery that perpetuates the age-old cycle of violence. Look how the Second World War grew directly out of the First World War. Look how Palestinian terrorism has constantly led to Israeli military action which has led to further atrocity followed by murderous acts of reprisal in the Middle East. Look how, though the war in Iraq has been declared to be over, yet the Shiite and Sunni factions, continue to try to obliterate each other, matching massacre for massacre, bombing for bombing and assassination for assassination. The circle of violence

just never ends.

Now, though we would never countenance capitulating to terrorism nor shrink from fighting a just war, yet we must also work towards ending this circle of violence. To do this we must listen anew to the voice of Jesus which challenges the accepted wisdom that we should always return measure for measure and give as good as we get. Rather than the visceral, primal, gut reaction of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, Jesus advocated a better way, a higher way, than trying to get even. “Love your enemies,” he said, in a radical reversal of common sense. “Do good to those that hate you, bless those that curse you and pray for those that mistreat you.”⁴ Many of his hearers must have smirked at each other, “Can you believe that?” they would say, rolling their eyes, “This carpenter from Nazareth is crazier than we thought!”

And yet, for all the ridicule that the contrary voice of Jesus received then, and still does today, yet it’s his voice that continues to stand as the singular greatest contribution to the betterment of human relationships ever made. Because it frees us from the need to get even. It breaks the never-ending cycle of violence. And it creates a potential for reconciliation between people that would not otherwise exist.

But it is not enough just to hear this contrary voice of Jesus and agree that there has to be an alternative way to the vengeful ways of the world. Nor is it enough to say that other people, like our political or military or law-enforcement leaders, should find alternatives to the recurring violence that blights the human landscape the world over. No, we have to do something ourselves. And we have to do it in the course of our own lives, in our families, in our workplaces and in our social groups. We ourselves have to play our part in bringing reconciliation to the contentious and conflicted situations – and people – we encounter from day to day. And to do this we have to think “out of the box”.

There were once two brothers who lived on adjoining farms and were bitter enemies. One would do something to annoy the other and then the other would top that. So their bitterness grew and grew. One day, the older brother answered a knock on his door. There was a carpenter with his toolbox looking for work. “Yes,” said the older brother, “have I got a job for you! My younger brother and I do not get on at all well. This week he really annoyed me by digging a deep river between our properties. But I am going to show him. I want you to build an 8 ft high wall along my side of the river. Then I don’t need to see him anymore.” Replied the carpenter, “That’s no problem. Show me where you want it and I’ll do a good job for you.”

The older brother had to go into town that day but when he returned, his jaw dropped because there was no wall between the two properties. Instead, the carpenter had built a bridge. And halfway across the bridge was his

younger brother coming with arms outstretched. “What a wonderful idea,” he said, “after all I have done to hurt you.” And the two embraced and were reconciled. “Stay with us for a while and do some more work for us,” they said to the carpenter. “I’d love to,” he replied, “But I have many more bridges to build.”⁵

Can’t we all find ways to build bridges of reconciliation instead of walls of hatred and so break the cycle of revenge in today’s world? Isn’t this what those who fought and died in two world wars – and in so many other conflicts over the years, from Korea to Afghanistan – isn’t this what they were trying to achieve? Not simply to win a war and be victorious over an enemy, but to realise those goals of peace, harmony and understanding that would render future wars unnecessary.

So there is nothing better we can do in memory of those we honour today on this Remembrance Sunday. There is nothing that would make those who fought and died for their country happier than to know we had found more constructive ways of resolving conflicts. And there is nothing that would make a more fitting memorial to the brave warriors of the past – as well as those who serve in the military at the present time – than our renewed commitment to following the way of Jesus and to building new bridges of reconciliation, love and peace in the world in which we live today.

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¹ Actually Fr. De Souza said here, “So let us not abnegate ourselves ...” I am not sure what he meant by this, so I changed his phrase to bring clarity.

² Fr. Raymond J. De Souza, “His wrath upon their heads”, *The National Post*, Thursday November 4, 2010.
<http://www.nationalpost.com/opinion/columnists/wrath+upon+their+heads/3774404/story.html>

³ eBaum’s World,
<http://www.ebaumsworld.com/jokes/read/370448/>

⁴ Matthew 5:38-48

⁵ Bob Tasler, “Restoration: Confronting the Brother”, *ChristianGlobe.com*, Sept 4, 2005