

Homily for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 2016

(Year C: Rev. 22:12-20mod)

I've been speaking all this Easter season about the passages we hear these weeks from the most-misunderstood book of the Bible, Revelation. Today we come to the conclusion. You remember that John wrote this story of his symbolic visions to explain God's view of history, to give hope to his people who were suffering in the Roman persecutions, and to give them confidence about where everything was headed. John has been telling them that, whatever they may be suffering right now, God is still in charge; and their patient endurance is what will unlock the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem where, in God's good time, "every tear will be wiped away."

Shift the frame now to today: What might we say to Christians who are right now being persecuted in the Middle East, in parts of India, in North Korea, in Sudan, or in China? Consider this story from Sudan:

At eight months pregnant Meriam [Ibrahim] was sentenced to death, and held in prison along with her 20-month old son, for allegedly committing apostasy from Islam. Her relatives also reported her to police for adultery after she married a Christian man.

Or this one, from Pakistan:

Asiyah Noreen is a Pakistani Christian woman who was convicted of blasphemy by a Pakistani court, receiving a sentence of death by hanging. In June 2009, Noreen was involved in an argument with a group of Muslim women with whom she had been harvesting berries after the other women grew angry with her for drinking the same water as them. She was subsequently accused of insulting the Islamic prophet Muhammad, a charge she denies, and was arrested and imprisoned. In November 2010, a judge sentenced her to death. If executed, Noreen would be the first woman in Pakistan to be lawfully killed for blasphemy. Noreen's family went into hiding after receiving death threats, some of which threatened to kill Asiyah if released from prison.

We can certainly say, as John does for his people, that we will not forget them and their suffering. We can say, as the people themselves say, that their faith will bring salvation despite their suffering. Consider this story, from Syria:

In a Christian neighborhood inside war-torn Syria, a young boy was waiting to be discharged from a hospital after undergoing surgery. Suddenly the building shook from a bombing.

His mother, who was with him, ran out of the hospital to look for help. After she left, a bomb directly hit the building and her son was killed.

"She told me, 'My son was already prepared to be in heaven'," Sister Maria de Guadalupe said of the mother. According to the mother, her son had recently reminded her of Christ's Gospel admonition not to fear those who can kill the body, but rather those who can take the soul.

Hope for final vindication, yes. But what about all the suffering in the meantime? Here John again shows he knows his people's hearts. So his final words are a prayer for deliverance and a word of final confidence in hope: The Lord is coming soon!

I wonder if we, who certainly have personal sorrows but also enjoy our comforts, can be fully honest about this in the way that John was. John looked for an end to this world and the coming of a new one. Would we be so eager to have everything we enjoy disappear, so that our sisters and brothers could see an end to their suffering? Probably every day, probably multiple times, we pray, “Thy kingdom come”: Can we mean it? If the coming of Christ’s new world means that I no longer have my own little “kingdom” of pleasures and satisfactions – do I really want that, even if it is the hope of deliverance for others who suffer? This is why we need to be reminded, over and over, that we are “one body in Christ,” and that “if one member suffers, all the members suffer together,” as Paul said to the Corinthians.

Awareness of the suffering of so many people in this world – not just from persecution, but from hunger, disease, and all the other ways our world is wrong – can bring us to a proper intensity in our prayer for God’s will finally to be done throughout creation. A final story for today:

Canon Andrew White is an Anglican pastor who previously divided his time between the United Kingdom and Iraq, where he was known as the “Vicar of Baghdad.” He left the country for good in 2014 after the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered him to do so, based on security risks and the church’s policy of not paying ransom for hostages.

In December 2014, White revealed that after his departure, four Christian children under the age of 15 had been executed by ISIS members for refusing to convert to Islam.

“ISIS turned up and said to the children, ‘You say the words that you will follow Muhammad,’” White recounted. “The children ... said, ‘No, we love Jesus, we have always loved Jesus’.”

“They chopped all their heads off,” White said. “How do you respond to that? You just cry.”

And you pray with John: “Come, Lord Jesus!”