

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

While visiting a state prison about ten years ago, I met four men who had each committed murder. They were sorry; they realized that the wrongs they had done could never be undone. They accepted prison as punishment for their sins. And they wrote a book about their childhood experiences and the path that led them to violent crime. They wanted to prevent others from doing what they did.

In recent weeks the killing of police officers in different parts of the United States has disturbed all Americans of good will. So has the mistreatment of anyone under arrest, especially persons of color. It is hard to understand what motivates people to hurt and kill others. Some perpetrators are mentally sick, but others, like the men I met in prison, learned from bad parents and false friends to lead lives of hatred and violence. The presence of such evil causes some good people to lose hope that it can ever be stopped.

We all have sins that are hard to control. We want to stop them, but we repeatedly fall into them. Some have addressed their problems and improved their lives. They manage their anger, seek help for alcohol or drug abuse, stop sexual infidelities, apologize to people they have offended, and spend more time with family and friends. But others have not controlled the bad decisions they make or the sinful actions they take.

In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul writes to a people aware of their sins. Most of his readers grew up in false religions, but now they follow Christ. Paul uses a strong word to describe who they were in their past. He says they were “dead”. Each of us can probably think of times when we acted inappropriately or said the wrong words, and, as a result, we felt “dead”. We felt that we were not the person we could be. But Paul says that Christians need not experience this. As Christ rose from the dead, so he has brought us to life along with him. He forgives our transgressions. Sin and death do not own us. Christ has obliterated the bond against us and nailed it to the cross. At the end of his life, the enemies of Jesus nailed him to the cross; but now that Christ is risen, he has nailed sin and death to the cross.

When we look upon the cross of Christ, we see an image of God who became one like us, suffered agony like us, and became mortal like us. But Paul invites us to see something more. The cross is the instrument of victory, the place where Christ has nailed our sins and sorrows so that they can no longer cause us harm.

Some people commit terrible crimes of hatred, prejudice, violence and terrorism. Their sins seem almost too large for us to confront. We cannot control gunfire in the streets, murder in airports, and death on sidewalks. We may think we have no tools to stop evil in the world. But we do. We have Christ on our side. With him we demonstrate the power of patience and prayer. Through him we never give up on the one who commits sin, whether it be a murderous enemy or our own worst self. In our struggles to overcome our sin we show the world a better way to live. Our good choices may just influence someone else who has never learned the power of repentance and of the cross of Christ.