

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
**Lent Inspires Spiritual Renewal**  
By Paul Turner

My cousin's son, Thomas, is in Baghdad. Just before Christmas – on his mother's birthday, no less – he left the United States for Iraq by way of Kuwait, as part of the Army National Guard. He's a gunner. Works in the turret of a humvee. My family prays every day for Thomas.

Before the United States went to war in Iraq, the Vatican begged us not to go. Church officials said the case for war was not clear, and a first strike was unjustified. Now that we are at war, the Vatican has been comparatively silent. Conditions have changed. If we pull out, matters could grow worse. It is hard to know what to do. War is like that. My family is very proud of Thomas. He interrupted his college years to put his life on the line for our safety and for the Iraqi people. He was on duty during the recent elections. He saw a man carrying an AK-47 toward a polling booth. Thomas told him he couldn't carry firearms to vote. No problem. The man put the gun back – in church. The man was the local priest.

I realize it's because of people like Thomas in the branches of our military that I don't have to carry around an AK-47 every day. I just wish we had a better solution to international problems than war. We are spending hundreds of billions of dollars on this war. Aren't there other ways to spend hundreds of billions of dollars that will also achieve the goals of peace and freedom? Then people like Thomas could come home. People like Thomas seem rare, but there are lots of them out there. They are risking their lives for the sake of others – for people they don't even know. Incongruously, that is love. Love is being willing to die for others. Love is alive and well – and it's at war. When you realize that someone is willing to die for you, you begin to know what it is to be loved. That is the sentiment that closes this Sunday's second reading (Romans 5:1-2, 5-8).

Whom would you die for? Probably not for very many people. Paul says, “with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die.” You would probably die for someone you love – for a family member, a close friend, or a mentor, someone whose ideals you admire. You might lay down your life for someone who was just and good. That's Paul's first argument. “But,” he continues, God did something more. “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Ouch. Not only was God willing to have Christ die for sinners – he died for sinners *like us*. Jesus laid down his life for us not because we were good or just, but because he loved us in our sin. His sacrifice tells about his goodness, not about ours.

Throughout the season of Lent, we the Church begin our renewal by coming face to face with our sin. We express our repentance on Ash Wednesday. We convey our remorse through the sacrifices of Lent. We bring our sin humbly to the sacrament of reconciliation, to experience first hand the loving mercy of God. If we take the time to

know the extent of our sin, we will know with amazement the depth of God's love. Even though we sin, Christ died for us.

This reading is proclaimed on the Third Sunday of Lent because all the passages that day have something to do with water. It springs from a rock; it comes from a well. This weekend we celebrate the first scrutiny of the elect, who will approach the waters of baptism this Easter. Paul uses a relevant metaphor in the middle of this passage: "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." It's quite an image. God pours love out on us – pours it out like water from a pitcher, pours it out on humans parched with sin, on desert lands parched with oppression. As the elect will be refreshed by the waters of baptism, so we are refreshed by the outpouring of God's love through the Holy Spirit.

Wherever this miracle occurs – in the desert, in our homes and in our churches – God brings refreshment and hope to those weary of weapons and thirsty for love.