

3rd Sunday of Advent

The lynching took place on April 3, 1882. An angry crowd of white people heard someone had shot and killed Police Officer Patrick Jones. Seeing a black man near the scene of the crime, they assumed he was the killer. Friends knew Levi Harrington as an honorable man, but that did not matter to the mob that day. They could see Levi was black. They tied a noose around his neck, hung him from Kansas City's 5th Street bridge, and - just to make sure - shot him dead. The next day police arrested George Grant, who was ultimately found guilty of murdering Officer Jones. No one was arrested for lynching Levi Harrington.

Levi's death was one of 60 that took place in Missouri between 1877 and 1950. The Equal Justice Initiative and other groups cosponsored a memorial dedicated to him two weeks ago at West Terrace Park a half mile northwest of here. The year this happened, 1882, is also the year on the cornerstone of this cathedral. At the memorial dedication this month Bishop Johnston quoted a statement by Missouri's bishops: "By publicly recognizing that lynching occurred here, and permanently marking these horrific acts as events of historical significance, we can begin the process of acknowledgment and atonement that is necessary for us to move forward as a people dedicated to the idea that all... are created equally in the image and likeness of God." Last month the entire US Conference of Catholic bishops approved a declaration called "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism." It includes this passage: "Racism arises when - either consciously or unconsciously - a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard.... Racist acts are sinful because they violate justice." The bishops write at a time when white supremacy movements have gained strength, and when legal injustices continue. For example, the US population has about five times as many whites as blacks, but 30% of the prison population is white; 33% is black.

Sometimes systemic circumstances of racism against Native, Black and Hispanic Americans seem beyond the reach of ordinary citizens to change. We may respond to the bishops' letter in the same way that people responded to John the Baptist. The crowds, tax collectors and soldiers who heard John's call to repentance all asked the same question: "What should we do?" John told them to feed and clothe the poor, to be fair with people, and to avoid false accusations.

The US bishops make similar practical appeals, calling us to a conversion of heart: to do justice, love goodness and walk humbly. They write of us American Catholics, "We ask them to fight the evil of racism by educating themselves, reflecting on their personal thoughts and actions, listening to the experience of those who have been affected by racism, and by developing and supporting programs that help repair the damages caused by racial discrimination."

If we could ask John the Baptist today, "What should we do?" we might hear him ask something like this: "Do you share your food; that is, do you socialize with people of different races? Do you treat people fairly? Or do you have unequal expectations of those who are different from you? Do you make false accusations? Do you remain silent when others make racist remarks?" One way to prepare for Christmas is to open wide our hearts.

Sunday, December 16, 2018