

Lent 2 - February 28, 2010

The Rev. Graham Bland

Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Jesus' response was to persist in the work that put him at risk, healing and casting out demons.

Lent is a season that wants us to acknowledge frankly and honestly the power of death in our world, and to identify those places where it persists so that the Word of God may confront and root it out. We believe Life prevails over the power of death. This is the Easter promise of new life through Jesus cross and resurrection.

On Shrove Tuesday, our daughter Erika in Vancouver informed us that her Guatemalan friend, Leo Juracán (known there as "Hurricane"), had gone into hiding with his family after he and his daughter received death threats. Leo is the National Coordinator of the Campesino Committee of the Highlands. These were not the first threats.

Erika was born in Brazil. She has identified with the plight of the landless in Latin. A Canadian priest friend of hers, Emilie Smith, is working in Guatemala with Leo and the members of their coffee producers cooperative. They seek a fair price for what they grow, through Fair Trade.

On February 20th, the Rev. Emilie Smith wrote this:

"Canada facilitated the flight, and opened the door, and yesterday Leo Juracan, Paty, Naydy, Allan and Johny arrived in Vancouver ... bewildered, heart-broken and furious, like all refugees. Yet they are determined, as never before, to carry on ... Over to you, everyone in Canada! "

I have been shocked to hear all this; I did not know that in Guatemala, in 2009, 42 campesino and indigenous leaders were murdered. There is a movement to "Break the Silence". So I feel compelled to tell you this story today that parallels so closely our Gospel.

Erika is going to Guatemala on Tuesday. What message shall we send for her friend Emilie as she continues her ministry in the face of these threats, with a larger benefit in view than her own safety? Shall we not affirm that she is acting in the tradition of Jesus, expecting with St. Paul that the Saviour will transform the body of our humiliation and the reign of evil into glory and Life?

Another story...

Black history month is drawing to a close. Today I want to hold up the confrontation of black people with the power of death in the last 5 centuries. It is well for us to remember and celebrate the many victories in this struggle and to recall that there is still a long way to go.

You may know about Rosa Parks. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a 42-year-old African American woman who worked as a seamstress, boarded a Montgomery City bus to go home from work.

She sat near the middle of the bus, just behind the 10 seats reserved for whites. Soon all of the seats in the bus were filled. When a white man entered the bus, the driver (following the standard practice of segregation) insisted that all four blacks sitting just behind the white section give up their seats so that the white man could sit there. Mrs. Parks quietly refused to give up her seat.

Her action was spontaneous and not pre-meditated, although her previous civil rights involvement and strong sense of justice were obvious influences. "When I made that decision," she said later, "I knew that I had the strength of my ancestors with me."

She was arrested and convicted of violating the laws of segregation, known as "Jim Crow laws." Mrs. Parks appealed her conviction and thus formally challenged the legality of segregation. A group named the Montgomery Improvement Association, composed of local activists and ministers, organized a bus boycott. As their leader, they chose a young Baptist minister who was new to Montgomery: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sparked by Rosa's action, the bus boycott lasted 381 days, until December 1956 when the Supreme Court ruled the segregation law unconstitutional and the Montgomery buses were integrated. The Montgomery Bus Boycott began an era of non-violent civil rights protests in the USA.

Who would have believed in 1955 that now America would have a black president? Yet through the small actions of little-known individuals acting in the faith of Jesus Christ, transformation was and is being wrought. With Jesus, they persisted in what they knew would put them at risk because they had a larger benefit in view than their own safety.

The principalities and powers of this present age – which is how the New Testament refers to whatever serves the power of death – are, in the cross of Jesus, identified, confronted and shown for what they are.

Now given this special day, Olympics-wise, I must take a detour here to recount one more story that seems topical

and somehow relevant. I hope you will forgive my being a little partisan ... (scarf!)

This is a (probably fictional) account of a radio conversation between a US Naval ship and Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland:- **US SHIP:** Please divert your course 0.5 degrees to the South to avoid a collision. **CANADIAN REPLY:** Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision. **US SHIP:** This is the Captain of a US Navy Ship. I say again, divert YOUR course. **CANADIAN REPLY:** No, I say again, divert YOUR course! **US SHIP:** THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS MISSOURI. WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE US NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW OR WE WILL TAKE DRASTIC ACTION!! **CANADIAN REPLY:** This is a lighthouse. Your call.

Of course, while we may, indeed must ridicule and laugh at the power of death – to expose it for what it is - we must not ignore its dangers.

Indeed, there is a pernicious and false version of the Christian message that suggests that my individual life and salvation are the main reasons for my relationship with God. This is not the Gospel.

The Way of Jesus in today's Gospel is totally other than this. Jesus does not run from the prospect of his death. Indeed he knows death is coming. But more importantly, he does not allow the threat and power of death to divert him from life, from what he came to accomplish. He does not allow fear to overtake him or make him concerned only for his own safety.

Jesus persists in healing and casting out demons and in finishing his work, which is not for his benefit but for ours. He does not succumb to fear but has in mind the well-being of all.

Jesus' concern is for the integrity and wholeness of all that is and for our part as human beings in the fulfilment of all things in Him. The idea of the salvation of individuals alone is a lie, a product of the power of death leading us to yield to our fears. So the power of death may lurk even in our day-to-day thinking about the faith.

We affirm, however, that we are all saved together or not at all. We may be certain with the Psalmist, and as the choir just sang, that we will “see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!”

The Lenten season invites us to consider our relationship with God, and how we relate to the human and more-than-human world around us.

Wherever life is denied and undermined, wherever there is brokenness, there we call upon the healing and saving power of Life in Jesus Christ. Wherever children are belittled, bullied or abused; wherever women are demeaned and threatened; wherever men have succumbed to violence; wherever institutions require people to sacrifice their most dearly-held values; wherever the more-than-human world is plundered and killed for our benefit; wherever the plight of the poor is dismissed or wherever the vulnerable are taken advantage of ... The scenarios are familiar to us here in Canada; we do not need to go to Central America to find them ...

... The Gospel calls us to enter into these situations, and there to wait on God. The power of death is pervasive; it is foolish to think otherwise. Jesus confronts it with his own Life and Presence and calls on us to do the same. We are not called into some kind of crusade, but into the fullness of our own lives. Not proudly, but humbly acknowledging our own complicity in the world’s ills and desiring to transform it under God.

I know there are those who criticize the Olympics as further evidence of injustice in our world, and there may be some truth in that criticism. But I want to harness that other energy I have been noticing in myself and in others the last couple of weeks ... have you noticed it too? It’s not just about competition and beating the other guy, but there is about it all a sense of that old Musketeers motto: “all for one and one for all.” I don’t hesitate to say that this is godly energy.

Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and salvation; whom then shall I fear ... be strong, and he shall comfort your heart; wait patiently for the Lord.” Or St. Paul: “Stand firm in the Lord.”

Please pray for those who stand with Jesus and with others in the most difficult circumstances. Pray that we may find courage to join hands with them and to stand there too.