

Sunday, January 31, 2010, 4th Sunday OT, Cycle C

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

Jer. 1 - before you were born I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

1 Cor. 13 - Faith, hope, love abide, the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4: 21-30 - filled with rage, they tried to throw Jesus off the cliff

I'm not exactly the warrior type. I'm much more at home in the library than the battlefield. But believe it or not, I did get into a fist fight once. The year, 1965. The place, the school yard of St. Patrick's Grade School in Richmond VA. In the half-pint bantam-weight division, in this corner, Eugene "Blondie" Burnett, and opposing him, Jimmy "Jimbo-the-Bimbo" Thompson. I have no idea now what this evil-doers offense was. Maybe he called me Jimbo-the-Bimbo. But I was angry enough to do something about it. There are some things I do remember quite clearly. I remember that at the beginning of hostilities, before the first blows were exchanged, all the other boys in our class ran over, encircled us, and began egging us on. When we landed some blows, they got really excited. I felt a surge of pride because Eugene was starting to get the worst of it, and the boys that would usually hardly even talk to me were cheering me on. The fight, however, was mercifully cut-off in the first round because Sr. Mildred scurried over and broke it up. Talked to us separately and made us apologize. Which we did, and I think we even mostly meant it. Eugene was not exactly a budding war-lord either.

In hindsight, even at that tender age, there were a couple of odd things about this incident. One is that once the other boys got involved, we had to fight. We were supposed to. I never talked to Eugene about it, but I'm sure we had both been told that in order to be a man there are times when you have to fight. Furthermore, when one of those times comes and you back down, then you are a coward, which is a despicable thing to be. So we had to fight. Scared or not, the shame of not fighting was unthinkable.

A second thing that struck me as odd was the instantaneous bloodlust of onlookers. Odd, because I was one of the objects of it.

And there's another thing that occurs to me as an adult. It strikes me that my taking on Eugene may have been substituting him for the person I REALLY wanted to beat up: Billy Chandler. He is the only human being that I've ever had a visceral hatred for, because he made my life so miserable on a regular basis. Overall, I found this little venture into physical aggression to be unsatisfactory, and I was never tempted to try it again. I couldn't have articulated it, but I had an incipient insight into what a weird dynamic happens when a fight breaks out.

1. In today's Gospel passage we have the continuation of the story from last week, when Jesus visits his hometown Nazareth and get people all excited that maybe he really is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah. But today we hear that even before the synagogue service is over, they are ready to kill Jesus. Why did the Nazareans turn so quickly against Jesus?

What made the people of Jesus' own hometown turn so suddenly against him? What did he say that was so outrageous that they drove him out of town to throw him off a cliff and stone him to death? If we can answer this question thoroughly and accurately, then we will have a great key to understanding ourselves and the violence all around us.

He in effect said the people of the gentile nations were more worthy than they were. Jesus inflamed them so quickly because what they heard was treason, a traitor to his own kind

As the Gospel proceeds, Jesus clearly expects his followers to be so changed, transformed, "converted," that we transcend the whole human dynamic of "them v. us." False religion is justification of this dynamic. False religion is the idolatry of difference. The truth is that we are more like each other than different, we are alike in our ability to deem each other not worthy of life. We are united in our desire to have a 'them' that we can legitimately hate. This dynamic heart of our darkness underlies national and cultural identities, and is the source of much of the world's ills. But we are called by Jesus Christ to transcend violence in every form. Ironically, doing so provokes violence in the unconverted, those who have not fully experienced redemption. And so we have the phenomenon that Christian witness is often the witness of martyrdom.

2. The Love Chapter from 1 Corinthians: this is what we are called to be. Last week I said that "We are called to BE that liberation and reconciliation that Jesus proclaimed." This is what it looks like. This divine love infused in our hearts by the Holy Spirit is to shine out not only by our words, but first and foremost with our lives.

3. But this does not seem to be very natural to us. Trying to substitute our own names for the word "love" in this great Chapter on love might be a good examination of conscience the next time you go to confession! Instead, rather than naturally being loving in all we do, we are wittingly and unwittingly trapped in snares of violence.

But how quickly we go to such violence our selves! Most of us do not actually engage in physical violence against others, not deadly force, at least. But we are all capable of it. But we do participate in many forms of violence.

- Interpersonal or psychic violence: hateful speech about another, tearing down others reputations, or imputing motives we cannot really know to be true or not.
- Moral violence - self-righteous judgmentalism
- social violence - writing off victims as literally the cost of doing business
- physical violence -
- Economic violence -
- intellectual violence - our theories to rationalize and justify the necessity of our violence, the necessity of their being losers.

I'm sure you have heard the old saying, "There but for the grace of God go I." That is true of all those we would condemn in our hearts. All those we treat with disrespect. All those we can look down on and be glad we are not them. But in a sense, we are them. Or, they are what we would be given the same circumstances and same choices. That could be us. In Christ, they ARE us.

4. How do we get there? What has to happen to so transform us that we could substitute the word "love" in 1 Cor 13 with your own name, it would be a consistent and perfect description of you?

we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. The fact that it comes to us as a gift is actually part of hope. God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect. His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is "truly" life. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* #31)