

1st Sunday of Lent 2018

There was a photograph in the NY Times this past week of a woman in grief holding on for dear life to another woman shaken and terrified.. What struck me in addition to the fear and pain etched on both their faces were the ashes on the forehead of the one woman. This past Ash Wednesday she had begun the day going to an Ash Wednesday service to receive ashes as I imagine most of us did. But for a mother of a child affected by the Parkland shootings, these ashes must have had a very real and immediate significance. Most of us would have received the ashes, worn them for the day as our Catholic “brand” and washed them off at the end of the day. Maybe even with a sigh. Oh well, another lent. Wonder if this will be any different than any others. Certainly for this mother and child and all those affected by gun violence this would be a Lent like no other.

And I wonder what words she heard when the ashes were signed on her forehead. *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return?* Remember that you are mortal. You cannot escape the fact that someday you will die and return to the earth from which you came. And if she heard those words could she have imagined that death was lurking around the corner for 17 people whom she may have known and had threatened the lives of many more, one of who was her daughter?

Or more likely did she hear: Turn away from sin and believe the good news!. And what was the “good news” for her to hear on a day when the powers of violence, hatred, insanity were the driving force behind senseless killings of the young by someone so young himself.

And what is the “good news” we hear together on the first Sunday of another Lent? Could it be the Rainbow, the sign of the covenant God made with Noah? Over here, we did our best to find flowers of all the colors of the rainbow. This clay pot which you may remember from the advent season on Ash Wednesday was filled with purple roses. Purple for Lent/ Roses For Valentines day. This “vessel” of clay molded and shaped as we are to be molded and shaped in the image of Jesus Christ this Lenten season. Yes, this is “good news” if we let ourselves be re-made and re-modeled in the image of Jesus. It is certainly “good news”

that God has entered into a covenant of love with us through Jesus but is it “really” good news.

Is it good enough for the mother signed with ashes and traumatized by the violence in parkland? Is it good enough for the dreamers who are traumatized by the fear of being exiled from the only country that they have called home? Is it good enough for victims of violence or anyone whose life and home and happiness is threatened by the “wild beasts”, ready to devour them?

If there is “really good news” it is that God through, with and in Jesus knows what it is to “not know”, to be like us in all things. To know and not know, to face “Wild beasts and demons of all kinds. (, doubt, distrust, despair, disillusionment, depression) The really good news is that God through, with and in the complete humanity of Jesus, is in solidarity with our human condition of confronting the “wild beasts of violence, irrationality, hatred, bigotry, all that threatens human freedom and dignity.

The first Sunday of Lent always begins with a gospel relating Jesus’ 40 days in the desert where he was “tempted”, “tested” “taunted” by Satan. Notice that in Mark’s gospel, we have no idea what form and shape the “tempting, testing, taunting took” Notice too that the Spirit who had just descended on him like a dove in the baptism when he hears the words “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” The Spirit “drives” him into the desert almost as if to say “You have no idea what awaits you so better be ready” There is an urgency in the Spirit’s driving Jesus into the desert. The sooner, the better. Something’s gotta give in this world. Someone’s gotta give for God. And that someone is Jesus of Nazareth.

That’s the really good news we hear today. In Jesus Christ, God is one with us as we deal with our demons, as we confront our fears, doubts and unknown futures. Remember the rainbow!

In a few moments we will be sending our Catechumens to the Cathedral to join with others in the diocese for the Rite of Election. These are special folks to begin with and now come to another stage in their journey with Jesus. They are our “rainbow”, they remind us of the

covenant God makes with us and renews and reshapes and remolds us, like this jar of clay.

On Ash Wednesday here at Xavier, in addition to the traditional formulas “remember you are dust”, “Turn away from sin and believe the good news” I added one more. “REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE LOVED, AND UNTO LOVE YOU SHALL RETURN” Not easy to hear or believe when the pain of loss and grief is overwhelming but all the same, its what we need to hear.