

Requiem Mass for Iraqi Christians killed in Baghdad

Westminster Cathedral, 26 November 2010

Sermon: Bishop William Kenney CP

My Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We have gathered this evening to pray for the eternal rest of the sisters and brothers who have died in Iraq because they are Christian. We have gathered to pray for their families and for all who mourn them. We have come to mourn ourselves. Some of you will have lost relations in these vicious terrorist attacks. Many more will have friends, relations or families who you know and who are affected by these killings. I myself am in that category having known the families of some of the people killed in Baghdad and earlier in Mossul. At the end of last week I met relations of some of the dead in Sweden. I should have travelled to Iraq before Christmas but that is now cancelled because of the security situation in the country.

Our emotions are of deep sorrow and possibly also of anger: anger that innocent people are killed in this way, that our friends, our relations are sacrificed for at best short term political gain, and at worst for no real reason at all, other than that they are followers of Jesus Christ.

We know the situation of our brothers and sisters still in Iraq who wake at night frightened by the knock at the door, the unusual sound, the gunshot or the explosion, the knowledge that few if any will defend them, the constant fear and tension of not knowing what will happen next. We who are here in England are angry when our Government said on Tuesday that it was safe for people to be repatriated to Iraq. You know in a way few others do how untrue that is.

In a few weeks time we will read of Herod killing the small boys of Bethlehem and we can make our own the text from the prophet Jeremiah which was then fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Ramah wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more." (Mt. 2:18)

We come this evening with our burden of sorrow, anger, frustration and perhaps the feeling that no one cares. We also come this evening and listen to texts which speak of the Glory of the Lord and the glory which will be ours. We read from the beatitudes and hear that they who mourn are blessed for they will be comforted.

Where is our comfort? How are we blessed? The people, killed in Baghdad and in other places because they are Christian and died for their faith, are in the great line of martyrs. That is something which the Church in England and Wales understands. The Church in these countries is built on the witness of those put to death because they would not renounce their faith. The Catholic Christians of this country know something about the sorrow, the pride, the despair and the joy of martyrdom for the Faith.

Today it is not only our relations and friends whom we have come to mourn. We have also come to honour them as people who have been killed because of their faith. We must express our sorrow that this has happened, for Christ tells us that if we do not bear witness to the truth then the stones themselves will shout out the message. But that message is the message of the Gospel.

You and I are obliged to announce the Good News of the Gospel, even in our sorrow and anger. Our faith tells us that all people who have been killed because of their faith, and all who live through Christ and in Christ and with Christ, and die clinging to Christ will live with him in heaven. This is indeed our glory. We need to keep our eyes on Christ otherwise we risk giving in to hopelessness, despair and the wanting of revenge.

Many years ago, there was a campaign in this country where it was said “there are no strangers, just brothers and sisters whom I have not yet met”. It is hard to understand that when we believe that we know who has killed our loved ones. Yet it is true. Many suspect that Muslims are responsible for the killings, but many Muslims have also fled to this country, and often for more or less the same reason that Christians have: poverty, insecurity, war and persecution. Even in our sorrow and anger we need to appreciate that every woman and every man is made the image and likeness of God. We need to call out to that image which is in every person that they may show us the godliness which is within them.

We need to take seriously the witness that the people of Iraq give to us. The Beatitudes which we have read are that witness. We mourn and we will be comforted in God's time by the people around us; we are meek and we need to realise that we will inherit the earth; at the same time we hunger and thirst for justice, and we will continue until we are satisfied; but we will be merciful, for we wish to be treated with mercy; we are pure of heart and peacemakers for we wish to see God. We know that when we are persecuted, when we suffer, when we are treated unjustly then the Kingdom of God is ours.

It is vitally important that we do this. This is our comfort, this is our blessing, this means that these deaths are not meaningless. It is what Christ himself says and we must have our eyes always on Him. It is what our martyrs would want. They are now with God, the God of the Beatitudes, the God who understands the weeping and lamentation of Rachel, the God who understands where we are, and who we are.

If God is with us who can be against us, whatever happens? You and I are called to give an even greater gift to the sisters and brothers around us. We are called to mourn and be proud, to seek justice in mercy, and to show that we in our sorrow can find a way to stretch out a hand to all women and men because we are Christians, because we are proud that martyrs are called from our midst, because we believe that every woman and man carries God within them.

Rachel wept and lamented her dead children. So do we. We do it however knowing that they are with God in his glory, knowing that we have from in our midst produced martyrs, witnesses to the Gospel, knowing that we are the poor in Spirit relying on God because we will inherit the Kingdom.

May God bless us all.

+William Kenney CP
Auxiliary Bishop of Birmingham