

Havant 2016 0731 Trinity 12 Proper 13 Yr C

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 / Colossians 3:1-11 / Luke 12:13-21

The Church now has another martyr.

From a worldly point of view, Fr Jacques Hamel is simply one more name to add to the 300 or so Christians whom current estimates suggest are put to death every week because of their faith in Jesus Christ. And this of course is not to mention the countless other men women and children who lose their lives in tragic circumstances every day - not least in parts of the world where we have become so used to horror stories that we all but take them for granted.

But now this universal suffering has come rather close to us, not just geographically, but emotionally too as we realise that something as innocent as what we are doing this morning can be such a dangerous place to be.

When Fr Hamel was murdered in Rouen last Tuesday morning, he was doing what every priest was ordained to do - to stand at the altar and, in St Paul's memorable words, to *"show forth the death of the Lord until he comes."* A horrible and tragic death. But Jesus' death, shown forth in the eucharist, was horrible and tragic. And yet the reason we celebrate it is not some macabre dwelling on the dark side of life, but a glorious proclamation that in Jesus Christ God has himself taken all the very worst the world could throw at him and has overcome it.

Good Friday, the cross and crucifixion are important not for themselves but because of the great events which may be said to form brackets around them: the opening bracket is formed by the Annunciation and Christmas, when we celebrate the coming of God in our flesh. The one who died on the cross on the first Good Friday was none other than God himself, hated and broken by the very world he had loved and created. The closing bracket is formed by Easter and Pentecost, the celebration of God's victory over sin and death and the sending of the Spirit on the Church so that everyone may be forgiven, made holy and brought safely to heaven.

That is why we are here today, not to glorify suffering and death, but to rejoice that they do not have the last word. This is what happens at every Eucharist, and of course it involves not only the priest celebrant, but also every member of Christ priestly people. If I may borrow a favourite phrase from the former prime minister (do you remember him?) Are "We are all in it together." While there is a special intensity which links priests to the sacrifice of Jesus held up in the Eucharist, this is a special form of the bond that links every baptised person to the Eucharist. To be a Christian is to be a person of the cross and therefore to be a person of the Eucharist. We need to live the cross and the Eucharist, every moment of every day. This is not, you understand, simply a "church service."

I hope you can begin to see where this is going. There is a particular and poignant significance about the killing of a priest at the altar. But just as the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the culmination of his earthly life of self dedication his Father - as we sing in a popular hymn "*the crown of pain to three and thirty years*" - our death, whether sudden and violent or peaceful and full of years, should be the end of a life totally given over to the one who gave himself totally over for us. The cross marked on us at baptism is a sign of the self offering of Jesus and of ours in him.

The point of all this is that bloody martyrdom will be the destiny or vocation of some, but not all and not most. But in its basic meaning "martyrdom" simply means "witness". We are unlikely to know in advance the moment and manner of our death. But we do know that every moment presents us with a choice to live for Christ and others in the light of the promise he has made "*that where he is in glory, there shall his servant be.*"

In a parish newsletter for All Saints day last year, Fr Hamel wrote, "*Do not think holiness is not for us.*" He wanted to encourage every member of the parish where he served as a curate to realise that being holy is not a peculiar reserve of the ultra-pious, but a challenge and possibility for everyone. That is the martyrdom for which we have all been baptised and in which we are strengthened every time we come to the Eucharist. To quote another frequently sung hymn: "*to bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King.*"