

SERMON: 2017/09/03 - BTR

KIDS' TALK:

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front. Walk around pretending to bully people: knock books out of hands, blow raspberries, etc.]

Are there bullies at school?

What do you do when you're picked on?

Do you fight back?

Do you respond to others being mean by being mean yourself?

Jesus told us to 'not worry about your life' [Mt. 6:25] and 'turn the other [cheek]' [Mt. 5:39], and that's a very hard thing to do.

Our *instincts* say we should be selfish and tough, but Christians are called upon to be different - different because God is watching us, and *He* will correct what's wrong; and that frees us to be forgiving like Jesus. Amen.

[Ask children to depart]

'Vengeance is mine,...says the Lord.' 'I will repay.' [Rom. 12:19]

Those are Saint Paul's words from this morning's reading, quoting God Himself in *Deuteronomy 32*.

*But* do you believe that? Truly, I mean.

Do you believe that God cares about what is wrong in the world *and will act* to put them right?

Do you live your life thinking to yourself, "I mustn't let anyone get the better of me; I mustn't let anyone else take advantage. Gotta be top-dog. Gotta make myself heard. Gotta look out for No. 1."

Is that what you think?

And more importantly, is that how you *are*?

It's interesting - and by that I mean 'ironic' - that in many conservative cultures - supposedly *theistic* cultures - cultures grounded in a religious faith-system, like in rural (Catholic) Sicily or Islamic Pakistan, that "vendetta" and "honor-killings" are so pervasive; so entrenched even today [n.1].

In those places it is of the utmost importance that you aren't "slighted" - aren't "demeaned."

Allow me to share this (news) story with you:

'For two months, over the thunder of machines at the steel mill, the men taunted Mubeen Rajhu about his sister...[Tasleem]

Some people had seen [her] in their Lahore slum with a Christian man. [But s]he was 18, a good Muslim girl...

"Some guys got to know that his sister was having a relationship," says Ali Raza, a co-worker at the mill. "They would say: 'Can't you do anything? What is the matter with you? You are not a man.'"

Raza can barely contain a smile as he talks about the hours spent needling Rajhu.

... He raises his voice to compete with the sounds of the coal-powered mill, and workers blackened by its dust gather to listen. They too smile. ...

"The guys here told him, 'It would be better to kill your sister. It is better than letting her have this relationship,'" Raza says.

Rajhu told them he had bought a pistol, and one day in August he stopped coming to work. ... For six days he paced. His rage grew. How could she?

He watched her laughing on the phone, ignoring their mother's pleas to leave the man.

On the seventh day, he retrieved the pistol from where he had hidden it and walked up to his sister and with one bullet to the head, he killed her.'

Why? "'I had to...'", he says. "There was no choice.'" [n.2]

*Really? He "had to?"*

I guess that that might be true if the atheists are right and we're nothing but clever machines competing with one another for finite natural resources (to maximize the

likelihood of producing progeny). If life has no more purpose than this, then I guess murdering your sister to protect your (village) reputation "as a man" makes sense.

But what about what the Bible has to say? That our present circumstances will one day be "*swept*" away [Mt. 23:39], and replaced by an eternal existence of either perpetual punishment or beautiful bliss *depending on our deeds* [Mt. 16:27 / Rom. 2:6].

You see, what I read to you was a *dreadful*, heart-breaking story, (and - according to many reports - only the tip of a terrible ice-berg [n.3]). And whilst it *is* easy to judge this man, and to imagine that some great gulf separates us from him; when I look around I see so many professing Christians whose daily decisions also fail to embody - *to reflect* - the promises of Scripture, and whose lives seem to be all about achieving material ends. About sensuality and practicality.

And yet what about the "sacred"?!

Moses, we hear, led a lonely, *impoverished* existence in Midian [Ex. 3:1]. It's fun to think that maybe the woman he met there and married was some great, romantic love; but she's swallowed by the text - and what does this suggest? It makes no comment about her beauty or her gifts, and why is that? Because her qualities *weren't* noteworthy. Likewise his son.

But this is a prince of Egypt we're talking about! One now reduced to mediocrity.

And the key reason for this is the absence of God. That's the shadow hanging over Moses' situation: He ran away to save his skin, but what about his soul?

And then this extraordinary encounter with a bush on fire - a bush that wouldn't burn. And from it a voice: a voice claiming to be the Father of the universe, and one with special regard for the descendants of Abraham [Ex. 3:6].

And this. changes. everything.

In that moment we see "the holy" - the sublime, the Heavenly - breaking in to a world of drudgery and anxiety - and for many people these things do dominate - just look at (some of) the faces in Wal-Mart; and as the Church retreats they will grow in the vacuum we leave behind, which is why *we must put Jesus first*, and 'not lag in zeal' but 'be ardent in spirit' [Rom. 12:11]. Amen.

Footnotes:

1. See, for example: <http://www.dw.com/en/dishonoring-the-men-of-honor-sicilian-style/a-16857970>
2. (3rd October 2016), "'I had to:' Man explains 'honor' killing sister in Pakistan', *AP*, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pakistan-honor-killing-explained-interview-man-kills-sister/> (accessed September 1, 2017).
3. See, for example: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/05/28/in-pakistan-honor-killings-claim-1000-womens-lives-annually-why-is-this-still-happening/?utm\\_term=.4a4aac062e03](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/05/28/in-pakistan-honor-killings-claim-1000-womens-lives-annually-why-is-this-still-happening/?utm_term=.4a4aac062e03)