

CHRISTMAS, 2013

I am going to begin this homily in an unusual way, but be assured that I will eventually get around to the great feast that we are celebrating on this holy night. In the first half of this month, all of us read about or watched on television the funeral services of Nelson Mandela. Among the many persons interviewed about President Mandela's legacy was a former American president, Bill Clinton, who said that in the past hundred years he could think of only two other persons who had had a similar impact for good: Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. I expect we could all add some other names to that list, but it is worth asking what those three men had in common. One obvious answer is that all of them worked in non-violent ways to bring civil freedoms to particular groups of people, and that in this way they inspired many others throughout the world to work peacefully for justice. But something else strikes me as also significant: each of them spent a lot of time in jails or prisons. Mandela was incarcerated for twenty-seven years in South Africa, most of that time in the prison on Robben Island; Gandhi was arrested six times during his early years in South Africa and another six times by the British in India, with his final imprisonment lasting nearly two years; and King was arrested and jailed five different times for civil disobedience in our own country. Remarkably, none of their sentences left them embittered but only steeled their resolve to continue working for justice. And Dorothy Day, whom some have called the most important American Catholic of the twentieth century and who may someday be canonized a saint, was also arrested and jailed a number of times during her long life, the last time when she was already seventy-five years old.

With all that in mind, let us now jump back to the time of Christ. The great figure of the Advent season that just ended was, of course, John the Baptist—again someone who languished in prison for condemning wrongful behavior on the part of a potentate and who, unlike the four

I've named already, was never released from prison but was executed there. Could anything similar be said of Jesus, the one whose birth we celebrate today? There are at least two senses in which I think the answer is yes. The first was named by St. Alphonsus de Liguori back in the eighteenth century. To be sure, the kind of piety common in his era was very different from what would resonate with most of us today, so his point will sound strange to us, but it is nevertheless worth noting that in one of his Christmas meditations St. Alphonsus wrote that the nine months Christ spent in Mary's womb was what the saint called "a voluntary prison ... a prison of love," and one that was not unjust because, though innocent himself, Christ had freely "offered himself to pay our debts and to satisfy for our [sins]." ¹ More literally true is that Jesus was a prisoner in the final hours of his earthly life: arrested in the garden of Gethsemani, brought in shackles before Pontius Pilate, and led to his death on Calvary for execution as a criminal. This may sound like a gruesome thing to ponder on a feast that is usually associated with tidings of joy and good cheer, but already at Bethlehem the trajectory was set for what happened some thirty-three years later outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Now what does all of this have to say to us? Surely by far the most important thing is not only that all six of these persons—four from our own time, two from the first century—suffered imprisonment unjustly, but also that none of them waged their struggle for righteousness by violent means. Our first reading tonight, from the prophecy of Isaiah, included these lines that we apply to Christ: "A child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.... His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice." It is because of such verses that we regularly call Christ Jesus "the Prince of Peace," especially at this time of year, and this is why any of us who want to be called his followers must also eschew violence and be peacemakers. It is all too

obvious that there is as yet no peaceful dominion over all the earth, and the total opposite is the case these very days in places like Syria and the Central African Republic, where terrible civil wars are raging, or in places like India and Myanmar, where there is fierce fighting in certain areas between members of different religions. The direct influence that any of us could have on those struggles may be so minimal as to seem non-existent, but in addition to fervent prayer for those who are suffering so much in those lands, we can certainly recommit ourselves to peaceful behavior in our own settings, avoiding not only physical but also verbal violence.

We regularly speak of Christmas as the celebration of our savior's birth—after all, the very announcement of his birth to the shepherds was that “today in the city of David a savior has been born to you.” Well, from what are we saved? What is this salvation? Most basically it is the offer of the only freedom worth fully cherishing: not the freedom to choose this or that, but the graced freedom to *want* to do only what is right, to *want* to live in a Godly way, to know by experience that virtuous living is not a matter of gritting one's teeth to fulfill some onerous obligation but rather to *rejoice* in doing what is right, in serving others rather than seeking self-aggrandizement, in promoting reconciliation in whatever ways possible. The cherishing of this way of life is expressed very beautifully in the Preface of this Mass in the words: “as we recognize in [Christ] God made visible, may we be caught up through him in *love of things invisible*,” while the Prayer after Communion phrases it very well in these words: “Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, that we, who are gladdened by participation in the feast of our Redeemer's Nativity, may through an honorable way of life become worthy of union with him, who lives and reigns forever and ever.” All six persons whom I named at the beginning of this homily truly lived such an honorable way of life. May we be inspired to follow in their

footsteps, above all in the footsteps of the one who continues to say to us as he once said to Peter and Andrew on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: “Come, follow me.”

¹ St. Alphonsus de Liguori, "Meditation VI on the Novena of Christmas," available online at <https://archive.org/stream/incarnationofjes04liguoft#page/n27/mode/2up> (accessed Dec. 23, 2013).