

Second Sunday of Easter (or Sunday of Divine Mercy)

April 28, 2019

“Were you there?” (African-American Spiritual, Author Unknown 1899)

On Good Friday, our choir minister, Mr. James Evans, plays the beautiful African slave hymn “Were you there?” Most know these words which are slowly and prayerfully recited: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The beauty of this hymn is realized when we respond: “Yes, I was there!” You may wonder how it is possible to say “Yes” to this question? No one alive today is old enough to have been there at the foot of the cross some two thousand years ago. However, most people alive today have witnessed someone suffering. This “Yes” that we profess is not dependent upon our age, rather it is because we are alive, and suffering is part of life.

I want to begin our reflection on this Divine Mercy Sunday, with the words of this African spiritual to help us understand that *Compassion is not Mercy* in its fullest sense. Many of you have witnessed an event which moved you to shock, grief, or tears. This event could have involved the sickness or death of a loved one, an animal mistreated a picture or movie of a person suffering, etc. Last weekend as so many Christians celebrated the rising of Jesus from the dead (Easter Morn), we saw images of the mass martyrdom of Catholics in Sri Lanka through bombings. My own heart was deeply moved as I stared at pictures of devastated churches, heartbroken relatives howling in grief as they cradled loved ones, blood stained statues. Like so many of you, my heart was filled with compassion. It is compassion, and in a sense pity, which we felt as we saw those images. Our compassion is a direct result of seeing the very real suffering another is enduring. Although we are miles away from the victims in Sri Lanka, we can suffer with them, showing compassion, not because we may also have lost a loved one through a heinous action, but we too have lost a loved one. I can empathize with their suffering because it reminds me of my suffering.

The Divine Mercy of God, which we honor today, encompasses so much more than just pity or compassion. God is able to offer His Mercy, not solely because of the suffering of His children in Sri Lanka, but because mankind is powerless in the midst of suffering. How often have any of us wished we could ease or take away the suffering being endured by someone we love? How many times have we heard someone speak of doing away with hunger, poverty, sickness? How often has mankind tried and failed to end suffering? God shows His Mercy because He sees us pitiful as we are. We could be full, healthy, and want nothing, yet we are still suffering due to our inability to end suffering. Only God, because only He is all knowing and all powerful, can end the suffering we all endure. So, why doesn't He? Could He have stopped the bombers from entering those churches Easter morning? Could God have stopped the disease which has or is killing my loved one? Could He make everyone in the world loving and peaceful? Yes, to these and so many more. Then, why does He, who controls all things, allow suffering? I wish I could offer you an answer, but I do not know one. If I were to guess, maybe in certain instances, like Sri Lanka, our suffering is tied to our freedom. God wants us to freely choose Him above anything else. He will not force us to love Him or our neighbor. Could God have forced the bombers to stop? Yes, but He would have taken away their freedom to choose to stop. When they walked into those churches, witnessed the worshippers, heard the music and singing, they could have freely chosen to walk away and not go through with their barbarism. However, they chose to freely martyr those Catholic men, women, and children. In His Mercy, He allowed mankind to crucify His loving heart again by this action and so many more we choose each day. Yes, God allowed this to take place, but I also believe He was there weeping and suffering as mankind again chose the evil, hurtful action rather than Him.