

1st Sunday after Christmas, 2014

John 1: 1-18

Christmas Light and Christmas Dark: America's Use of Torture

Rev. Deacon Eric Johnson

Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes

There has been good news and distressing news this Christmas Season.

In the Good News Division, Downtown Anacortes has been very beautiful in the past few weeks. All the trees are filled with lights, and not only as a means of warding off Seasonal Affective Disorder during these shortest days of the year

The lights also are a way to remember that “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”(Jn 1:4-5,9)

John's theological reflection holds up a mirror to all the stories about Light that surround the arrival of Jesus in the world:

- Zechariah's prophecy: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death...” (Lk 1:78-9)
- Shepherds tending their flocks near Bethlehem at night, when “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them...” (Lk 2:9)

Christmas also reminds us that just as Jesus came to bring light into the darkness, he has also sent out to be the light in the world.

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus tells us. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5: 14-16)

We are the ones who carry the light. Teresa of Avila made this clear when she wrote in the 16th century:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which to look out with
Christ's compassion to the world
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless humankind now.

We Christians have certainly blessed humankind:

In our ranks we find St. Paul, St. Francis, William Wilberforce and Desmond Tutu. In the United States Christians have built most of the hospitals and many of the schools and helped bring about the end of slavery

Yet, just as we think that we can sit in the glow of our own deeds, there was some disturbing news that came to us this month in the form of a Washington Post Poll (11-14 December) on the use of torture

[First of all a few caveats:

- I don't argue for the truth or falsity of the Senate's report on the CIA's use of torture.
- I realize that a person in the pulpit has little chance for feedback, so I'll stand by at coffee hour for comments.
- My comments are only directed to the idea of torture (not any specific location or time or agency)]

Here's the Poll:

Are the actions of the CIA classifiable as torture?

- White Evangelicals: 39%: yes
- White Catholics: 45% yes
- White non-evangelical protestants: 53%: yes
- Non-religious: 72%: yes!!
- John McCain: yes

Was CIA treatment justified? "Yes," said

- White evangelicals: 69%
- White Catholics: 66%
- White non-evangelicals: 75%
- Non-religious adults: 41%
- John McCain: No

This was a total surprise to me. White non-evangelicals are more likely to justify torture than evangelicals and Roman Catholics? I would hope that we Episcopalians are not like that 75% of white non-Evangelicals ...but it appears that in the mind of the WA Post, we are. The survey didn't separate by denomination, so we'll never know

The survey also didn't report on the views of people of color, and I expect that would have been interesting.

Apparently, the 69% of white evangelicals who approved of torture are able to justify this by reference to the Holy Bible!

The Bible certainly has conflicting views on this issue.

Some hold that God ordains the state to wield the sword in defense of order and justice.

"Sure, war and torture are bad," they state, "but, sadly, they're necessary to bring about the ultimate good."

The book of Joshua is filled with tales of conquest in which Yahweh commands the utter destruction of cities and their population...just to allow the ultimate good of having the Hebrews live in peace in the Promised Land without being tainted by the religious practices of the locals.

Samuel's command (1 Samuel 15:2-3) to Saul regarding the Amalekites also has a similar command to ethnically cleanse a nation: "Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all they have; do not spare them, but kill both men and women, child and infant, ox and sheep, cattle and donkey."

However, it seems to me that the arc of the Biblical history and the Biblical understanding of God—as you move from Joshua to Jesus—replaces the genocide of Joshua with the message that we are to care for the least of us.

In Leviticus / the Psalms / the prophets / the New Testament: utter destruction has been replaced by caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and foreigners.

For me, the ultimate authority is: what does Jesus tell us?

Jesus said in Luke's Gospel: that we ought to “love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.” (Lk 6:27)

In the Gospel of Matthew, and we hear this teaching of Jesus again. He says, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you (Mt 5:44-45).

Our baptismal vows in the Book of Common Prayer have a similar demand: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?... Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

Now this sounds very nice, in a Pollyanna-ish sort of way, but there are many Christians, apparently, who believe, “Let’s get real. Let’s get practical. My belief in Jesus as my personal savior is irrelevant to my opinion on torture.”

They would agree with Chuck Colson (of Watergate and prison ministry fame) who wrote that torture might be "inconsistent with the Christian understanding of human dignity," but "as with all moral obligations, there may be circumstances for exception." (WashPost: On Faith,” November 2007)

This is the kind of argument that got Jesus killed.

Jesus was executed because he was a threat to Rome, to the family of Herod and to the high priests selected by Herod’s family

“It is better for you to have one man die for the good of the many,” says Caiaphas, the high priest, “than to have the whole nation destroyed.” (John 11:50)

Of course, when Caiaphas and Rome wanted to display the power of the state, simply killing Jesus wasn’t good enough. Why not throw in a little extra: scourging at the pillar; crowning with thorns? (Although you could argue that this, at least, didn’t cause permanent bodily injury)

The tormentors of Jesus did all this, not for any actionable intelligence, but they scourged and crowned him with thorns just because they could.

The willingness to torture another human being just because you have the power to do so is the best argument (from a strictly practical viewpoint) against torture ...not because of what torture does to the victims, but what it ultimately does to those who apply the torture.

Torture not only makes the victim less than human; torture dehumanizes the torturers as well.

This was well understood by the founders of this nation...At least this was the way it was told to me in the half-dozen training sessions on the Geneva Convention that I received in the course of a 30-year career in the US Air Force.

During the Revolutionary War, John Adams wrote that he was horrified with daily reports of British and Hessian atrocities, but he said, “I know of no policy but this—Piety, Humanity, and Honesty.” (See also David Hackett Fisher: *Washington’s Crossing*)

American Revolutionary War leaders adopted this as the “Policy of Humanity.”

Besides being a morally justifiable policy, it had the effect on the enemy and on ourselves that leaders like Washington and Adams expected: it weakened the British desire—especially in Parliament—to continue the war with America.

As a side effect, many Hessian and British prisoners of war opted to stay in America or found a way to emigrate to America after the war.

The British and Hessians came to fight and use every brutal means possible against American soldiers and civilians. The British had become well-versed in ethnic cleansing following the Battle of Culloden and had good results in their brutal clearing of Scots from the Highlands. But the tables were turned on the Brits by the power of our values.

The U.S. military throughout its history shared these values, and Americans were known throughout the world as those who followed a policy of humanity towards their prisoners of war.

My German mother noted to us kids that at the end of World War II, those German soldiers who were caught between the Russian and American lines rushed to the Americans so that they could surrender to those who would treat them humanely.

So I think about all this in terms of the Christmas message, the message of “Fear not!”

Everyone wants a future without fear.

And I think we also want a society that values human life and that values other people, just like we want other people to value us.

The fundamental issue about torture is the way we think about who we are: Are we a people that value life? Will we strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

How do we “strive for justice and peace?” That is the question.

Christ Episcopal Church in Anacortes can’t take on every government that uses torture as an instrument of war.

But we can wage some micro-winnable battles.

We could gain some allies in that battle by joining in the efforts of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (<http://www.nrcat.org/>).

This was an organization started in 2006 by 150 religious leaders of all faiths who are joined to end torture.

Individuals cannot join; only organizations can become participating members, which include:

- The Episcopal Church
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Episcopal Peace Fellowship
- Episcopal Diocese of Western New York
- St. Anne’s Episcopal Church (Winston-Salem NC.)

Missing from this list is:

- The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia
- Christ Church Anacortes

What does it take to become an endorsing/participating member?

- Be a religious organization
- Endorse the statement of conscience (what this homily has been about, but shorter)
- Consider using and promoting National Religious Campaign Against Torture.

Details will be coming shortly to a church near you.

Depending on the wishes of the congregation, this would be a fine organization for our Bishop's Committee to endorse and to encourage the Diocese of Western Washington to endorse as well.

The question, again, is "Are we a people who believe that each person is created in the image of God?"

For me, that is the fundamental issue about torture, about who we are as a people, as Americans, as Christians, as Episcopalians.