

DISHING OUT HELL OR HEAVEN: 3rd SUNDAY EASTER B

Brian Gleeson CP

The famous French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, once said: *"Hell is other people."* Judging on hellish things done to others, sometimes this is all too true. In December a young Indian woman about to start her career as a medical doctor in Delhi goes out with her boyfriend to see a movie. On their way home in the bus they are set upon by a group of three men, who then brutally rape her, murder her, and try to hide her body. The many people who esteem and love her are left broken-hearted. But the perpetrators and even their lawyers have the audacity to claim they are innocent, because any decent girl would not be out after dark. In the USA a young unarmed man flees from a policeman who chases him and shoots him dead with a spray of bullets. In Kenya on Good Friday one hundred and forty-two students, mainly Christians, are gunned down on a university campus north of Nairobi by Islamic militants. In Australia a young teacher lets herself into her high school on Easter Sunday to prepare her next class, but is stalked by someone known to her. Her assailant shoots her dead, transports and burns her body in bushland many miles away. She was supposed to marry the love of her life in a few days time.

But if hell is far too often other people, so too is heaven. The good news is that many people constantly and repeatedly bring comfort, joy, reassurance, peace and contentment to others. On television recently Nana Mouskouri, now in her eighties, wows her listeners with her beautiful signature song, "The White Rose of Athens". An autistic boy wanders away from home into forestland near a weir and goes missing for five days. But many people give up their Easter holidays to join the police in the search. Finally, cold and hungry and sitting on the side of a precipice, he is spotted from the air and rescued. When a mother takes a dizzy turn and accidentally drives a car full of children into a lake, dozens of people wade into the lake to try to free them.

Just days ago you and I were remembering the sufferings and death of Jesus our Saviour. As we looked on his crucified body with sorrow, love and gratitude, we came face to face with the dark side of human nature that led his enemies to

give him hell by torturing and humiliating him and then killing him on the rough wood of a cross. On that black day in Jerusalem, the capacity of human beings to hate, hurt and harm one another went completely out of control.

Good Friday found us wondering over and over again: Why was this good man, this innocent man, this man with so much honesty and integrity, so much humanity and compassion, so much warmth and generosity, so much affection for others, violated, humiliated, tortured and murdered?

The motives which led his enemies to persecute and destroy him are those which have always influenced human beings to hurt and harm one another: arrogance and pride, power-seeking and ambition, envy and jealousy, anger and fear, hatred and revenge. Good Friday reminded us of the dark and hellish side of human nature and of its associated evils.

Fortunately, however, this is not the whole truth. In fact, it is far from it. For if we experience so much evil we also experience an abundance of goodness, a taste of heaven on earth. The crops keep producing food for our tables. The summer heat gives way to cooling autumn breezes. Most diseases are now curable. Tyrants are sometimes overthrown. Social reforms like pensions for the needy are here to stay. Conflicts end in reconciliation. Shaky marriages get patched up. Love survives misunderstandings, thoughtlessness, and indifference. Wars come to an end. Enemies become friends. We forgive others and are forgiven, just as our Risen Lord has said in his gospel promise today that, *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations...”* In a word, there is goodness everywhere, more goodness than evil. Clearly, in all such traces of heaven, the light of Easter, the influence of the Risen Christ, keeps shining upon us.

Yet there can be no doubt that one mighty struggle goes on between good and evil, between hellish and heavenly influences. It goes on in the material universe, in human societies, and within our own personalities. Evil even seems stronger than good. But it has not yet finally triumphed. Good is remarkably resilient. Though too often it seems to be in danger of being crushed, it manages to survive, and even to win many victories. The words of Mahatma Gandhi, Father of Independent India, are so true: *“When I despair I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been*

tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but, in the end, they always fall.” The words of our Easter Vigil express the same truth in an even more appealing way: *“The power of this holy [Easter] night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy. It casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride.”*

Our continuing celebration of the resurrection of Jesus reminds us that evil will not have the last say either in us or in our world. It leaves us in no doubt about the ultimate triumph of goodness, not only in ourselves but everywhere around us.

Jesus was buried at sunset, to all appearances a victim and a failure. But on the third day the sun came up on him alive and powerful, influential and victorious. It will be the same for us who continue to celebrate Easter above all by renouncing and rejecting anything and everything dark and evil in our lives, and by renewing our determination to always walk with Jesus in his light.

So, dear People of God, what’s it to be? What will we dish out to others? Will we give them hell on earth, or with the grace of God will we give them a little bit of heaven?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com