

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 15, 2015

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on the Gospel Reading for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

DARKENING THE LIGHT

What religious group is the most persecuted in today's world? The answer might be surprising. It's Christians.

Recently John L. Allen, one of the most respected Catholic journalists of our day, published a book entitled, *The Global War on Christians*. He writes that Christians are the victims of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. They suffer because of Hindu radicalism in India. They find themselves the target of state sponsored atheism in China and North Korea. And in Europe and North America they face growing secular hostility and challenges to their religious rights. The author points out that the secular International Society for Human Rights estimates that currently 80 percent of violations of religious freedom in the world today are directed against Christians.

The question arises, why are Christians being persecuted? People who follow the teachings of Jesus would hardly seem to be a threatening presence in any society. For Jesus taught his disciples to love their neighbor, to do good to others, and to imitate his mercy and compassion.

A possible explanation might be found in this Sunday's Gospel (John 3:14-21). There Jesus says, "And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light."

Jesus was certainly confronted by people's preference for darkness. He came into the world so that humanity might be saved and brought to eternal life. As he said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." Yet the world rejected the Son and threw him upon the cross. The light of Jesus, the message and challenge of Jesus, was too much to bear. It was too bright for a world steeped in darkness.

Christians are called to follow Jesus, the light of the world. They are to shine the light of his teachings and the values of the Gospel into the dark places of the world. But just as many people reacted with hostility to the light of Christ, so the light that Christians are called to shine is often met with that same hostility. That is especially true in our day when the darkness seems to deepen day by day.

Into the darkness that accepts abortion and now euthanasia as permissible choices, Christians shine the light that discloses the value of all human life from the moment of conception to natural death.

Into the darkness that portrays pornography, prostitution, and every "shade" of sexual activity as merely forms of recreation, Christians shine the light that reveals that sexuality is meant to communicate love, commitment, warmth, tenderness and care for another person.

Into the darkness that idolizes the celebrity, the rich, the powerful, and the successful, Christians shine the light that shows that those truly worth imitating are those who work to ease the suffering of the outcast, the poor, and the marginalized.

Into the darkness that proclaims that society and governments are the judge of what is right and wrong, Christians shine the light that announces that God is the lawgiver. God decides the path for humanity.

Into the darkness that so blinds human eyes that men, women, and children are seen only as worthless infidels, collateral damage, or tools to be used, Christians shine the light that discloses all people as God's children whose hearts ache, whose eyes cry, and whose hands caress their loved ones.

For those caught up in darkness, the light that shines from faithful Christians is too bright to endure. So as they did to Jesus, those in the darkness do all they can to dim and extinguish the light. As Jesus said, "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light." But we read in the Gospel of John, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5)

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