

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER 2011 Year A

Often paintings can draw out feelings and stir the imagination more deeply than words. A few years ago in London, the exhibition, "Seeing Salvation" drew vast crowds of people. Perhaps the pictures in the exhibition were able to speak to people about the truths of Christian faith in a way words could not. One painting in particular stands out. It was a painting by the Spanish artist Zurbaran who painted in the early seventeenth century. It shows a ram with large horns lying on a dark altar. The white of the ram contrasted with the blackness of the altar. The altar is the place of sacrifice. The feet of the ram are bound together by rope. The animal is not wounded. Whilst the animal once had strength, now it appears vulnerable. The ram is innocent but it has become a victim of violence. It symbolises not only Christ but all those who have suffered violence and who are innocent; victims of crime, people who have suffered for their faith, the victims of unjust punishment, innocent people who have been executed, the victims of war who are innocent, often the poor and defenceless, women and children.

The First Letter of Peter is written to Christians who are living in a variety of cities now located in modern Turkey. Then Christians were in minority groups who often experienced opposition and persecution from their neighbours. The letter gives encouragement to the Christians and tells them that the life of Christian discipleship will often lead to suffering in the same way as Christ's way of life inevitably led to his crucifixion. In the midst of suffering, Peter encourages them to be faithful and to trust in Christ. They have the responsibility to live as good citizens and contribute to society but also to hold firm to their beliefs and values. But this **will** lead to difficulties.

The letter intends to show the way in which love motivated Christ to give his life so that others may have life to the full. It is hard to

understand that Christ allowed himself to suffer because of his love for his Father and for humankind. Love enabled him to be faithful to his mission and continue to spread the message that the Father loves all, especially those who are weak, weary and may feel lost. His love enabled him to bear the sins of all people so that they might be saved. Christ becomes the Paschal Lamb, the one sacrifice at the New Passover, for the forgiveness of sin.

Zurburan's picture shows the mystery of innocent suffering. He is the victim of the violence against him that led to crucifixion..... the instrument of human salvation.

Down through the centuries we know that many have suffered and died for their faith and even today there is persecution in many parts of the world. The suffering of Christians continues among those who proclaim justice where there is injustice, corrupt government or abusive economic practice. Many have disappeared because they spoke the words of justice. In many countries, Catholics – *and* others – suffer because their values are not respected. For example, even in Australia, it can be very difficult to work in obstetrics or gynaecology if one is opposed to abortion. The situation that Peter describes continues today for many people. That's why respect for others is so important. It's why dialogue with others – as part of our local Inter-Church Council perhaps – is so important. The protection of religious liberty – for ALL – is a starting point for the work of justice.