

Lent 2, Year C

- I hope you'll forgive me if it seems like my mind is elsewhere this morning
- If it seems that way, it's because it is – in two places, really, neither of which is here
- The first place my mind can be found is in Christchurch, New Zealand, where fifty human beings were killed and another 50 or more injured for nothing more than trying to speak with God – shot down as they attended Friday prayers at their mosque, their holy sanctuary
- The second place is a church in the Holy Land, in the city of Jerusalem called Dominus Flevit – a church on the Mount of Olives, not far from the garden of Gethsemane with a Latin name meaning “the Lord wept” – a place that is itself no stranger to violence against people, and no stranger to that violence being given a religious veneer
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- Tragedy in Christchurch involves a shooter whose only motivations seemed to be to cause death and destruction, and to divide people against one another
- I don't know his name and to be honest I don't want to know it – in fact, I find myself praying his name is forgotten by history
- I'd much rather learn the names of the dead – names like Daoud Nabi, the 71 year old who welcomed his own killer saying, “peace, brother”
- Or Naeem Rashid, who saw his 21 year old son killed in front of his eyes, and then threw himself at the gunman trying to prevent other fathers from suffering the same fate
- Names like Hosna Ara Parvin, age 42, who jumped in front of her husband's wheelchair, giving her own life so that he might keep his
- Or Khaled Mustafa, a Syrian refugee who fled a war-torn country to find safety for his family, only to die violently in the place he thought was his refuge
- Fifty children of God – fifty individual stories whose endings were all cut short by someone who wasn't content to let God write them
- I have no words even to describe such an act – no words, that is, other than evil, than sin
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- And I'm at a loss when it comes to how we can fight that tide of hatred, that frightening abyss of nihilism that is okay with cutting human life short for reasons that can be described as muddled at best
- Because while it was Muslims who were targeted, it wasn't religion that was the source of all that hatred

- The shooter wasn't seeking to advance his own religious cause, and while he was against Islam, it wasn't because of what Muslims believe – but because of what Islam represented
- It wasn't religion that compelled the shooter – it was fear
- Fear that a different culture was crowding his out
- Fear that our world is not enriched by a multitude of experiences and viewpoints
- Fear that eventually a majority will choose a viewpoint not his own
- Fear that there isn't room in this world for all of us
- So perhaps it's good that we're in a season of penitence, a season of repentance – because I think at one time or another, we've all felt that fear – maybe only slightly, or maybe in ways we don't want to admit, but I think we've all been conditioned to think that the success of another person, or even another culture, can only come at the expense of ourselves, of our own
- We've all feared that someone else might get what we deserve, haven't we?
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- I've been thinking a lot about these past few days, and I keep coming back to one line – just a phrase, really – from a part of the Christian tradition that deeply understands persecution and hatred
- A phrase that might, I think, speak some small measure of comfort and light into the darkness of this horror
- It's the refrain from a Spiritual which simply says that there's "plenty good room, plenty good room, plenty good room in my Father's kingdom."
- There is plenty good room for us all in the shadow of God's wings
- And what's more, the fact that there is room for other people down here with us, in the protective embrace of God – plenty good room even for people who aren't like us – doesn't mean for one second that there is less room for us
- That church I mentioned, Dominus flevit, is a powerful reminder in so many ways, not least in that name, "the Lord wept" – lest we forget that during tragedies too deep for words, God is still here in the midst of it all, weeping right along with us
- But the church also contains a mosaic in its altar that you might've heard me mention before, a mosaic of a mother hen with a brood of chicks under her wings
- And the words around it cite Matthew, but are identical to the ones we heard just a bit ago, in Luke's Gospel:
- "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

- In times like this, I have to tell you I grasp to that image like a life raft: I cling to the idea that God longs to gather us all up, like a hen gathers her brood under her wings
- But the trick is, we have to be willing – willing to huddle together in the warmth of God's embrace
- And willing to share some of that space, some of that shade, some of that refuge and protection – with those who aren't like us – with people we despise, people we think undeserving, even people we fear
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- So if, in the wake of this horror, you're wondering what you can do, wondering what we as a community can do, I'm afraid I don't have a perfect answer
- All I have, I think, is this:
- We can try to put those creeping fears to rest – can try building bridges instead of walls
- We can be willing to make room under God's wings for everyone we meet
- We can reach out to one another and to the world, in hopes of sharing some of that comfort, some of that warmth, some of that protection and love, with everyone
- Because there's plenty good room in God's kingdom – plenty good room for us all