

A woman comes screaming into the hotel lobby – it’s full of journalists. She wants to tell her story of abuse at the hands of the Authorities – how they have abused her, and how that behavior is entirely characteristic of all that is happening in her country.

The authorities response? To try and forcibly remove her – threatening, struggling, and finally throwing a bag over her head – making her blind.

She tried to tell her story – she tried to tell the truth. But her truth was inconvenient and embarrassing for those who sought to control truth with fear and violence.

While we need to be careful of direct parallels (since John’s gospel is the most anti-Semitic), her story bears a striking resemblance to the story we hear today – of someone who had been dismissed as less than human because he was not perfect, because he was blind, and then, when he tried to speak out for a way of living that offered wholeness, was expelled from his sacred home.

So this was a double-rejection. First he was rejected, an outcast, a beggar, as an incomplete human being. We can guess at some of the reasons: fear of someone who wasn’t normal, who wasn’t like everyone else, who reminded all who met him that somehow, in their view at least, he was an abomination because he violated their belief that all creation had to be perfect (though, remember, God didn’t say creation was perfect, he said it was good!).

Jerusalem in the 1st Century is a long way off. Tripoli in the 21st isn’t really much closer.

It could never happen here! Could it?

It happens here all the time! In an Eastern state a few weeks ago a state Senator proposed cutting all funds for assistance to those suffering from a variety of disorders – the psychologically challenged were his main targets. “We shouldn’t be paying for their problems”, he said, “we don’t want them here, and if we stop paying they’ll just go away”.

There is, I think, a temptation to be appalled by this sentiment, which has remarkable echoes of the policy of the Nazis in 1935, but also to think that, well, that’s not here.

That’s a very human response. It’s one a German Lutheran Pastor named Martin Niemoeller had – at first – in the 1930’s. However he had a change of heart, for which he was incarcerated in Dachau. Miraculously, he survived and was freed by the Allies in 1945. Of his failure to act in the 1930’ he said this, in a poem:

First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Why do we act like this? One reason is fear. Fear is easily molded, and target toward specific individuals or groups who are “different, not like us”, and it soon escalates out of control.

As one leader once said: “The people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.”

Fear that makes apathy attractive is a lethal cocktail. It has led to devastating and violent consequences on our own continent. The House Committee on Un-American Activities, which lasted from 1938 to 1975, is one example. “Are you now, or have you ever been.....?” Because they were different, not like us.

It has led to days like April 4th - tomorrow – when in 1968 a single bullet fired from a Remington 760 Gamemaster took the life of Martin Luther King Jr. because he was different, not like us.

Or when, in 1998, Matthew Shepard, a member of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Casper Wyoming, was tortured and left to die tied to a barbed-wire fence for the crime of being gay.

Now it's become not just a refusal to accept that physical or mental imperfection, now it's simply looking or acting differently than others. But our faith says that this has nothing to do with our humanity or our intrinsic worth. It's exactly this that lies at the heart of today's readings. In the Old Testament, Israel's greatest Judge-Prophet, Samuel, cannot see the king who is right before his eyes, because he's not muscular and mature. Yet the blind man “sees” Jesus before he has sight, and so follows his instructions. But none of his neighbors, or those who had seen him before, recognized this now-sighted man because they had treated him before as less than human, and so why would they?

So the star of the show in today's gospel is the blind man, who eloquently testifies that wholeness doesn't have anything to do with being physically – or mentally – perfect, and that the only qualification for being a part of a community is a willingness to love others and accept them for who they are.

The pantomime plays itself out. The formerly blind man's unwillingness to be cowed by those who would really rather he just went away is an eloquent witness to the cost of integrity and genuine faith. He is cast out of his spiritual home. But then, John tells us, it had stopped being that the moment his eyes were opened, and a new vision of holiness came into focus in the person of Jesus.

Fear and apathy. A refusal to embrace those who are not like us. A search for scapegoats. Good Friday comes around much more frequently than once a year, doesn't it?! And that cross is pretty crowded with all the people we want to put up there. Perhaps, on Palm Sunday, we'd be a little closer to the truth if we made a change in a personal pronoun: "Crucify them! Crucify them".

But not the truth is out for all of us: how, now, should we act?