

On this Palm Sunday, 2018, I heard the reading of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the shadow of his betrayal, crucifixion, and death. The “hosannas,” sung with joy during the processions of previous years as an expression of celebration and praise, this year has more of its original meaning for me. The expression *hosanna* is taken from Psalm 118:25: “Lord, grant salvation!” and is actually a plea for help. This year I heard it as a plea. Perhaps a partial reason for my somberness is that last Friday Ruth and I attended the burial of my cousin’s remains in Arlington Cemetery, located just across the river from Washington, D.C., but I think more likely the cause was reading excerpts and reviews of the book by Bishop Saad Sirup Hanna, *Abducted in Iraq: A Priest in Baghdad*.

Bishop Hanna, then a young priest, was abducted as he drove home from celebrating mass on August 15, 2006 and held for twenty-eight days. During that time his captors often moved him, blindfolded, from place to place in the trunk of a car. Their purpose seemed confused because, on the one hand, they demanded ransom but, on the other hand, they tried to convert him, promising him a position as a teacher.

“Kafir! Kafir!” That was the word, meaning “infidel” or “nonbeliever,” that the Muslim extremists shouted as they repeatedly beat Bishop Hanna in an attempt to force him to convert to Islam. “You are the ones who need to understand something,” Hanna said, the blood dripping from his back and shoulders. “I will not become a Muslim, and I fully know that you are going to kill me for it.”

During that time, Bishop Hanna wrote, he cried out to God in the silence of his blindfolded darkness, “Why? Have I not done all that you asked of me? Have I not helped my people any time I could? Why would you put me here? What is the reason?”

In excerpt after excerpt, I heard, “I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard.” “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me.” “They all condemned him as deserving to die. Some began to spit on him.

They blindfolded him and struck him And the guards greeted him with blows. Jesus became “obedient to the point of death.”

As I read or hear the Sacred Scripture, the Word of God, I fear that all too often we hear it, detached, as if it is merely a story we have heard often enough that it loses its power for us.

Another passage from Bishop Hanna’s book comes to mind:

So much wrong fills the world we today inhabit, so great is the mass of injustice and brutality, that for the survival of our sanity, we must corrode,

at least in part, our capacity for empathy. For if we were to truly mourn for every death, for every massacre, from Iraq to Nicaragua and from Papua New Guinea to Nigeria, we would grow mad in grief. And yet I cannot but feel there is a madness in not grieving.

Yet during his captivity Bishop Hanna wrote of his self-discovery and deepening faith, and in this book expresses insights and conclusions:

For me, I have again been reborn into my purpose: to tell others that faith need not wilt in the face of difficulties but can blossom, offering a greater clarity; that a belief in the love of God compels us to see the love in one another; to not separate those who believe from those who do not; to not judge one faith to be above another, but to see that some people can find a rationale for violence from religion, while others find a rationale for unity.

You are not [he concluded] a priest just for Christian people but to everyone, and especially for Muslims. You are a man of dialog, respect, and love. You show this in how you act and your words. You must know how [to] speak and present your faith to those who are different in faith and religion.

Bishop Saad Sirup Hanna “humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death. . . .” In Bishop Hanna’s story we have the story of a human being living in our own time. God forbid that we would have to experience such fear and excruciating pain, but we have in the story of Bishop Hanna a reminder of our Lord Jesus, who

though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
something to be grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness;
and found human in appearance,
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

The accounts we hear from Sacred Scripture, like the experience of Bishop Hanna, are the experiences of human beings, and those accounts call us to humility, dialog, respect, and love for all, even of our enemies, and perhaps especially of our enemies. Amen and amen.