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Passers-by at Calvary

John Dear | Mar. 30, 2010 On the Road to Peace

The spring of 1993 was one of my most memorable Good Fridays. A thousand gathered for a rally, and then marched on to Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Weapons Labs, near San Jose, Calif. And there several hundred knelt in prayer -- knelt in trespass, said the authorities -- and submitted to arrest. It was a day to remember, but even more so because of our guest of honor and main speaker was the Rev. William Sloan Coffin.

The former Yale chaplain and the esteemed preacher of New York?s Riverside Church, in his day second in preeminence only to Billy Graham, Coffin had agreed to teach for a semester at my theology school, the Graduate Theological Union. And as organizer of the Good Friday vigil, when I heard the news, I invited him to join us.

That January, I went to his spare office in Berkley and told him enthusiastically about our Good Friday plans. He readily agreed to address the crowd. The vigil, he said, would be the highlight of his semester.

A friendship soon developed, but first, he had to endure my audacity. I, a Jesuit scholastic with no experience preaching, proposed an outline for his sermon. ?How about for your text,? I said, ?Matthew 5 and Matthew 21 ...?

I told him how to piece to the sections together. ?You could preach on the teaching and practice of nonviolence, the commandment to love our enemies and Jesus? civil disobedience in the Temple?.? I felt sure I could show the great man a thing or two -- about preaching, of all things.

He leaned back and listened calmly, his eyes twinkling with a hint of amusement. When I finished he said tolerantly and gently, ?I was thinking more of Matthew 27:39 -- ?Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads, and saying, ?Save yourself if you are the Son of God.??

?I want to say that we are no different than the passers-by on Calvary, who walked passed the crucified Jesus. Thousands drive by Livermore every day. And they, too, shake their heads and say, ?Isn?t it a shame? If only something could be done! If you are the Son of God, do something ...??

?Would that be alright, John??

That Good Friday morning, as the sun rose over Livermore Labs, Bill preached his sermon to an enthralled crowd. He challenged us not to be passers-by, but protesters at the ongoing crucifixion of Christ among the world?s poor. Do everything we can, he said, to stop the planned nuclear crucifixion of the planet.

Seventeen Good Fridays have passed since, and not much has changed. Many of us still walk passed modern day crucifixion scenes. We sigh, ?If only something could be done!? We drive by death row, the Pentagon, Los Alamos Labs, our local military recruiting center, and many other places of death -- and we just go by.

One way to look at our peace-and-justice work, in light of the Good Friday story and Bill Coffin?s acumen, is to

understand our true place in the story. We do not want to be passers-by anymore. We do not want to be soldiers or crucifiers. We do not want to be religious or political leaders mocking those who struggle nonviolently for justice and peace.

Instead, we want to enter the life of the crucified Jesus by risking our own lives for justice and peace. We want to be like Mary and John, and stand with the crucified peoples of the world.

This is happening all over the world. Last weekend, a handful of Pax Christi New Mexico friends held a 24 hour prayer vigil at Santa Maria de la Paz Church in Santa Fe to mark the seventh anniversary of the U.S. crucifixion of the people of Iraq , as well as the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This was no ordinary Eucharistic adoration. For nearly 24 hours, friends read out loud the names of the dead. Thousands of them. Dead Iraqis, Afghanis, Pakistanis and Americans. A litany of crucifixions.

It was an evening of sorrow, time to face what our country has done, to pray for the dead and for an end to the killing, and to stand at the foot of the cross with the holy women and the beloved disciple.

A year ago on Holy Thursday, friends and I crossed the line onto Creech Air Force Base in the desert of Nevada , headquarters of the unmanned U.S. drone fighter bombers. Authorities held us overnight in the Las Vegas jail, and threatened with trial and prison -- and then in August, the prosecutor decided not to pursue the case.

But then last week, as if out of the blue, officials changed their minds. They will try us after all, and imprison us if they can, for daring to oppose the U.S. war machine?s latest weapon -- the drone. At the moment, the trial is set for summer, and once again I?m preparing myself for prison time. I draw strength from Good Friday, which issues a call to stand with the crucified peoples of the world. And because of the Sunday that follows, I go forward in faith, hope and love.

?We?re all Good Friday people,? Buddhist leader and peacemaker Joanna Macy told me last week, while we were speaking at the Upaya Zen Center?s weeklong chaplaincy training program in Santa Fe. ?And things are going to get much worse, as the world collapses even more. We need to help others, to sow seeds of peace, and to teach people not to be afraid. We have to be here in the present moment with them, in this Good Friday world. But we can be on the lookout for Easter.?

I hope this week we can walk with Jesus to his Good Friday death, and stand with him in the crucified peoples of the world -- from Detroit to Bagdad to Kabul to Port au Prince. If we stand with him at Calvary, if we can face the world?s pain and suffering with open, compassionate hearts, if we dare resist the injustice and wars that kill and hurt so many, one day, we?ll stand with him in the new life of resurrection peace.

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will lead a retreat, ?The Gospel According to John,? April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, PA, see www.kirkridge.org; and ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. He will lead weekend retreats on "Jesus and the Gospel of peace" in Massachusetts, May 21-23 (see: www.rowecenter.org) and Los Angeles, June 17-20 (see: www.hsrcenter.com). John?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace and Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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