

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Christ the King, amen.

The people who crucified Jesus did not know what they were doing.

Although they attempted to anger him, Jesus responded with forgiveness.

Although they mocked him with a sign that said, “King of the Jews,” Jesus showed he was the king of all God’s people, the Messiah. Although they challenged him to save himself, he saved the criminal next to him. Jesus turned evil into good and as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords he continues to do the same today.

A couple of years ago we were all horrified to learn that 21 Coptic Christians had been executed by Islamic State terrorists in Libya. I’ll never forget the video of those brave Christian men lined up and kneeling on the beach in Libya. Coptic Christians are largest Christian community in the Middle East, and one of the oldest in the world. They trace their church back to Saint Mark, who introduced Christianity in Alexandria, Egypt, just a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. I actually toured a Coptic Church outside of Cairo Egypt when I was there during my Air Force years. I was even instrumental in donating all of our left-over food and other resources to the monastery and orphanage at the Church of Saint Bishoy. (SLIDE) This particular house of Worship contains the incorrupt body of Saint Bishoy, (SLIDE) who in life was known for his love and ascetic lifestyle. He lived such a spartan life he is known in Church History as the Desert Father.

Back to the story at hand... (SLIDE) These 21 Coptic Christians were taken hostage and executed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, released a video of the killings titled, "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nations of the Cross." ISIS clearly wanted to send a message to Christians around the world, to residents of what they call "the Nations of the Cross." Much like the people who killed Jesus, they did not know what they were doing. Instead of weakening the Christian faith, they strengthened it.

The 21 men who were murdered were working on a construction job as tradesmen. They were just regular people like you and me. All were Egyptians except for one. He was a young African man. A Greek Orthodox bishop by the name of Demetrios of Mokissos (SLIDE) said the executioners demanded each hostage identify his religion. Under threat of death, they could have denied they were Christians, but instead, each of the men declared their trust in Jesus. Maintaining their faith in the face of evil, each man was beheaded.

Bishop Demetrios described this crime as "a grotesque example of the violence Christians face daily in Libya, Iraq, Syria and anywhere ISIS prosecutes its murderous campaign against anyone it deems an infidel." Thank God the ISIS Califate has been defeated or at least greatly set back... You know, as horrible as these executions were, the story has an unexpected and inspirational ending. The young African man who was with the Egyptians was not a Christian when he was

captured. Yet, when the ISIS terrorists challenged him to declare his faith, he replied: “Their God is my God.” What a statement! “Their God is my God.” After hearing those words, the terrorists killed him. In that moment, the young man became a Christian. Jesus said to him, as he said to the man on the next cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”. Bishop Demetrios concludes, “The ISIS murderers seek to demoralize Christians with acts like the slaughter on a Libyan beach. Instead they stir our wonder at the courage and devotion inspired by God’s love.” The terrorists who killed that young man did not know what they were doing.

On this Sunday called Christ the King, we are confronted by a king who dies on a cross. Instead of saving himself, Jesus saves others. Rather than crying out in anger, he asks God, His Father and our Father to forgive the people who kill him. Both then and now, Jesus brings good out of evil. What a difference it makes when people see Christ as their King, even though that king is hanging on a cross. The criminal next to Jesus did this when he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. The young African man on the Libyan beach did this when he pointed to the Coptic Christians and said, “Their God is my God.” Both the criminal and the young African man saw Christ as King. They grasped his power and trusted him to save them. In the face of death, they put their complete faith in a crucified Lord.

As the Bishop said, such stories stir our wonder, but they also leave us with a question: Are we living our Christian faith in such a way that people will look to us and say, “Their God is my God”? The challenge for us is to speak in ways that reveal authentic faith and act in ways that show real courage and devotion. **Only when people are inspired by what Christians say and do will they be willing to accept Christ as their king.**

Jesus continues to turn evil into good on Libyan beaches and in American cities. Sometimes the evil is human violence, which falls under the category of moral evil -- evil that is done by a sinful human being. Other times it's just natural evil, which is often attached to painful experiences that cannot be blamed on any person. Unlike the killing of Coptic Christians, this category of evil doesn't involve human choices and is usually the result of a natural process. Cancer, genetic defects, tornadoes, earthquakes -- these can be described as natural evil, because they arise out of nature and cause tremendous suffering. Fortunately, Christ the King has power over all forms of evil, moral or natural.

I had a seminary professor who was convinced actions speak louder than words, and Christian service provides new ways of knowing Jesus today. “Words are lovely,” he says, “but in the 21st century, when we have rhetoric everywhere, maybe people are paying attention to how you and I live, to what we do.” It's better for us to be participants, than commentators.

There's a story of a young couple who moved from New Jersey to Iowa to start their careers. They visited a couple of churches, but didn't join a congregation. Then the wife discovered that she had Stage 4 breast cancer and was terrified. She entered the hospital for surgery, and was visited by the pastor of one of the churches they had attended. Once home, the young wife received a visit from one of the women of the church. She brought a casserole and said she and her fellow church members had been praying for the woman and her husband. The wife thanked her and asked how much she owed her for the casserole. The woman said, "Sweetheart, this is free." They talked for a while, and then the church woman helped by cleaning the house.

The next day, there was another knock on the door. This time it was a man from the church bringing another dinner. The young wife offered to pay him, and he said, "No, this is free. This is what we do." Then he offered to fix her screen door, and he went out and got his tools and fixed it. The congregation brought a meal to this couple every day for six months. The two had so much in their freezer that they invited their friends to a meal at their house. When asked, "Where did you get all this food?" They replied, "It came from our church." Note the pronoun: Our church...

What made the difference was actions, not words -- how Christians were living and what Christians were doing. In this Iowa community, young adults were

looking at authentic Christian devotion and saying: Their God is my God. And once again, Jesus the King was bringing good out of evil and life out of death.

I love reading and hearing about these kinds of stories. They stir my wonder, but more importantly, they fan my faith. Maybe in the 21st century, folks are looking for a group of believers who act for the glory of God. Believers like the Coptic Christians on the Libyan beach and like the men and women of the Iowa church. You don't have to look to distant beaches or even the heartland of America to see how people who know Christ is King behave. When I saw people from this congregation step up and help Jr pack and get ready to move so she could be close to her daughter and grandson, this congregation proclaimed "Their God is our God!" When we have a great fun time bidding on silly items we don't need, but end up raising nearly \$2500 for needy children to have a great Christmas, you're saying "Their God is our God." In these and so many more ways you all are taking your stand alongside those men who bravely declared their allegiance to Jesus Christ, The King of Kings on that beach in Libya.

May we be living examples of Christ's love shining brightly in the darkness of this sinful world. May people see our actions and say this is MY CHURCH. May God continue to bless our mission and ministries and all of you who take your stand with Jesus our King, amen.