

29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Luke 18:1-8

In 1994 over one hundred days almost one million people were slaughtered in the small East African country of Rwanda, in a tribal war between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples. At the end of the fighting it is estimated that twenty per cent of the nations population was dead.

During what it is now known as the Rwandan Genocide, a young college girl named Immaculée Ilibagiza hid with seven other women in a tiny bathroom of a small house. For three months these women huddled in that bathroom never leaving it for fear of slaughter. Immaculée wrote a book of her time holed up in that tiny room and describes how the fighting came so close that she could hear men and women and children been hacked to death outside the window of that bathroom. She remembers hearing the cry of a baby as it lay alone outside the house, and she remembers the cry of that child growing fainter as it slowly died. She remembers her brother as he stood before men with machetes and she writes: "Instead of negotiating or begging for mercy, [my brother Damascene] challenged them to kill him. 'Go ahead,' he said. 'What are you waiting for? Today is my day to go to God. I can feel Him all around us. He is watching, waiting to take me home. Go ahead—finish your work and send me to paradise. I pity you for killing people like it's some kind of child's game. Murder is no game: If you offend God, you will pay for your fun. The blood of the innocent people you cut down will follow you to your reckoning. But I am praying for you... I pray that you see the evil you're doing and ask God's forgiveness before it's too late.'"

Immaculée was asked how she survived for ninety-one days with seven other women in a tiny room whilst the slaughter of her family and her friends went on just outside the window. She says that she survived because she prayed

prayed—most especially she prayed the Rosary. At first, she says, she prayed for those who were killing. She says she prayed amidst the hatred she had for those men and women and whilst she knew she must forgive them she felt herself poisoned by the desire for vengeance. And then in a moment of clarity born of grace the Lord helped her to see that those murderers were His children, just as she herself was His child, and she writes that her hatred turned to compassion for these men and women because they were so violently blinded by their own sin.

When after months the killing had stopped she found herself face to face with the man who had slaughtered her mother and her brother. She said to him, “I forgive you.”

Every day we are faced with a choice between anger and compassion. Every day we have a choice to forgive or not to forgive. It is easy to hold on to bitterness and resentment, to nurture them and to make them grow because so often these things feed our sense of justice. In the Book of Ecclesiasticus it says, “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.” Revenge gives us comfort, whilst forgiveness seems unjust.

As the Lord was nailed to the Cross, as the soldiers beat him and drove the iron spikes through His hands and His feet and ground a crown of thorns into his skull, as they spat on Him and teased Him, He said: “Father forgive them. for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Every day we have the chance to make our confession and to know the mercy of God, and even with imperfect sorrow for our sins we will not be denied forgiveness. So if we expect the forgiveness of God, and in fact, never doubt it, then who are we to deny forgiveness to others? We can treat sin like a game, as though it really does not matter, as though God will forgive us whatever we do. But forgiveness is not excusing the behaviour of others, for God does not excuse our behaviour. It is not condoning the sins of others, for God does not condone our sins. It is, however, the opportunity given to free

ourselves from the poison of sin—our sin and the sin of others. It is an act of faith and hope and charity.

We cannot presume upon the mercy of God unless we are merciful. We cannot presume upon the love of God unless we love in return.

Immaculée said: “I knew that my heart and mind would always be tempted to feel anger—to find blame and hate. But I resolved that when the negative feelings came upon me, I wouldn’t wait for them to grow or fester. I would always turn immediately to the Source of all true power: I would turn to God and let His love and forgiveness protect and save me.”