

Third Sunday of Advent

In the harbour of the city of Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, there is a large 50-foot statue, in stone and bronze, of a Dominican friar called Antonio de Montesinos. The statue is a memorial to a sermon delivered by Montesinos, on behalf of the community of Dominican friars in Santo Domingo, on the fourth Sunday of Advent in 1511.¹ The gospel text that day was the one we have just listened to from the first chapter of John's gospel, with the words of John the Baptist, 'I am a voice crying in the wilderness' (1: 23), and the statue presents Montesinos with his hand up to his mouth crying out across the sea as a voice in the wilderness of colonial Latin America.

It is a sermon which has been remembered over the centuries, and its 500th anniversary was celebrated in 2011. Given that 500 days would be a very long time for most sermons to endure in the memory, what was it about this one that made it so impactful?

Montesinos is a rare figure of light in the dark history of the conquest of the Americas. This sermon, delivered only 19 years after the arrival of Christopher Columbus, was preached to the colonial officials and others involved in the conquest. Montesinos declared the enforcers of the conquest to be in a state of mortal sin for their treatment of the Indians. He offered a biting critique of war and conquest, and of the link between greed and death in the colonial pursuit of gold. Above all, he spoke in defence of the humanity of the Indians.

In that early modern period, Europe was beginning to debate whether these indigenous peoples, who seemed inferior to the Europeans in culture and politics and religion, were truly human. Today we would phrase the debate in terms of understanding 'the other', or 'othering' people who are different to us. At the heart

of Montesinos' sermon are a few beautiful, but hugely meaningful, words, posed to the congregation in the form of three questions about the Indians:

Are they not human beings?

Do they not have rational souls?

Are we not obligated to love them as we love ourselves?

These are the words from the sermon that are found today on a plaque at the end of the huge statue of Montesinos.

What was the reaction to this daring sermon? We know from a number of sources that reactions ranged from astonishment to anger. Some officials tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent him from finishing Mass. The colonial officials complained to the prior of the community, Pedro de Córdoba, and demanded that Montesinos retract his statements. The prior told them that the sermon was the responsibility of the whole community of friars on whose behalf Montesinos spoke. The following Sunday, Montesinos preached a sermon with the same condemnation of the conquest and defence of the Indians. When news of the sermon reached Spain, King Ferdinand V said that the friars were guilty of preaching 'new doctrine' and of undermining his rights as king.

Montesinos' sermon was effective and influential for he included a humanist defence of the Indians (they are human beings, are truly rational, and able to govern their own lives), and then moved to the fundamental Christian challenge. The Indian is not only a subject with rights but a sibling to be loved.

On this Sunday in Advent in 2023, we can lament the enduring relevance of that 1511 Advent sermon by Montesinos, for there are many locations today where this early modern sermon could be preached to officials and politicians and Christian congregations: Are they not human beings? Do they not have rational

souls? Are we not obligated to love them as we love ourselves? But they are words that we also have to consider when facing those who are hostile and violent in our own society, even as we challenge that hostility and violence: are they not human beings? Are we not obligated to love them as we love ourselves?

I was drawn back to this sermon when I read an article last month in *The Guardian* by Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Court. The headline was ‘We are witnessing a pandemic of inhumanity: to halt the spread, we must cling to the law’ (November 10th, 2023). I was really struck by that phrase ‘a pandemic of inhumanity’. Kahn said that this ‘pandemic of inhumanity has taken hold, from Darfur to Ukraine ... and now in the intolerable tragedy that is deepening in Israel and the State of Palestine.’ These human rights emergencies, Khan says, are interconnected. ‘At their heart’, he says, ‘they are driven by a common crisis: *a failure to give value to the lives of all people.*’ Unsurprisingly, Karim Khan calls on the world to cling to international law in the midst of this pandemic of inhumanity.

How does this pandemic of inhumanity specifically challenge us as Christians, especially as we prepare for the feast of the Incarnation? We have seen recently how a small group of extremists can mobilize a crowd. Surely we are called to a different kind of mobilization, to bring the balm and medicine of the gospel to bear on this pandemic, to inoculate ourselves against the virus of dehumanization and the amplification of hate, and to witness to the light by defending the humanity of others.

All the great religious traditions teach us something about the meaning of being human. What is specific, then, about the Christian perspective? Using a term from biblical studies, we can describe Jesus as *the* exegete of the human person. An exegete, as you know, is someone who interprets, particularly a scriptural text. Jesus is the exegete of the human person. Jesus interprets for us what it means to be human, firstly, in the light, shadows, and darkness of our own personal lives.

Jesus, as exegete of the human person, also offers us the gift of being able to interpret and defend the humanity of others, even those whose ways may seem so different to ours.

Karim Khan identified the common crisis at the heart of the pandemic of inhumanity, that is, a *failure to give value to the lives of all people*. The Incarnation is the antithesis of inhumanity and dehumanization. The Word became flesh and dwells among us, in all flesh, in all human forms. The Incarnation is the ultimate expression of the inherent value of the lives of all people. That is what we prepare to celebrate at Christmas, and the light we are called to testify to in the face of the many forms of inhumanity near and far.

Let us pray,

Jesus, exegete of the human person, help us to understand our own humanity and give us the courage, like Montesinos of old, to defend the humanity of others in the midst of this pandemic of inhumanity. Amen.

Ethna Regan

17th December 2023

¹ We know the content of this 1511 sermon from the *Historia de las Indias* by Bartolomé de las Casas (c.1484 - 1566).