

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
Sunday March 18th
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Miserere mei, Domine, cubanus sum – Why do we harm
ourselves?”
Joshua 5:9–12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Luke 15:1–3,
11–32)**

The title for our 2007 Lenten sermon series is “Waiting for Alleluias in Lent” based upon the book “Waiting for Snow in Havana” – the book chosen as the text for the 2007 One Book, One Philadelphia program. Meg and I chose this book to accompany us on our Lenten journey as we allow Holy Scripture to enter into dialogue not only with our own lives but also the life of Carlos Eire, who at the age of 11 is forced to leave his native Cuba with brother but not with parents... along with some 14,000 other children. It is a book which one reviewer describes well as “wry, heartbreaking and intoxicatingly beautiful”. And it was our special privilege to have the author, Professor Eire, with us last week for our parish worship and our parish brunch.

Today’s theme, chosen in conversation with Professor Eire, is “Why do we hurt ourselves?”. The theme is based on a Latin text which comes towards the beginning of the novel. “Legend has it that [St.] Jerome used to say, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, I am a Dalmatian’ while he beat his breast with a stone, struggling to suppress his own will and make his soul ready for God’s abounding grace. What a wise man. He knew how deeply sin dwells in our skin”... Carlos Eire then speaks of his own worst instincts and then writes, “I have to make a slight alteration in Jerome’s prayer... ‘Miserere mei, Domine, cubanus sum, Have mercy on me, Lord, I am a Cuban’”.

Though Jerome was grateful for the blessings and security of living in the Roman province of Dalmatia... yet he often found himself drawn to ways of sin... self-destruction and suicidal harm.

Though Carlos Eire was born in Cuba (what one of the stern monks at his school says might have been the original paradise)... yet he often finds himself drawn to ways of sin... self-destruction and suicidal harm.

And though the Psalmist knows that “happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven”... yet “he holds his tongue, his bones wither away, he groans all day long and his moisture is dried up”... he too often finds himself drawn to ways of sin... self-destruction and suicidal harm.

Friends, here indeed is a great mystery... and one so wretchedly painful. Painful for those who are gripped by this self-destructive, vicious and pernicious cycle... and painful for those who can only watch and pray with tear-soaked eyes and hearts in turmoil.

At a rehearsal on Thursday I was encouraging the bridal party to take communion at the wedding if they wished. One bridesmaid said she probably would not; I suggested that in that case she come forward to receive a blessing... in her surprise, she uttered, “Oh... I’m good”.

Who is there here today who is able to say at all times, in all ways. “Oh I’m good”? Most of us know what it is, to quote Professor Eire, “to be hoisted by our own petardos, over and over and over”.

We read that sometimes Professor Eire plays with his children a game based on the film “Island of the Lost Souls” starring Charles Laughton. “I ask them suddenly and unexpectedly, ‘What is the Law?’. They know the answer, slowly and ponderously, ‘We shall not walk on all fours. We shall not drink blood’. [This] is particularly endearing when it issues from my youngest son’s lips, ‘We shall not walk on all foahs. We shall not dwink bwood’... I want them to know that there is a law, and that there is a beast inside each of them, always itching to ignore it and break free”.

Do you remember the anguish of St. Paul as he almost moans, “The good that I would, that I do not... and that what I would not do, that I do” and then plaintively he cries, “O wretched man, who will deliver me from this body of death”?

Spare us, spare us, Lord God – I am Dalmatian, I am Cuban, I am... human!

In today’s Gospel, can you not hear the younger son cry out, “Miserere mei, Domine, filius iunior sum”... have mercy on me,

Lord, I am the younger son? Look at the stages of self-destruction and suicidal harm...

v. 12 his relationship with father becomes one of demand

v. 13 he runs off to a distant country and he squanders his wealth

v. 14 he begins to know real need and poverty

v. 15 he becomes enslaved

v. 16 he becomes destitute... so much promise, so much despair

In today's Gospel, can you not hear the older son cry out, "Miserere mei, Domine, filius maiore sum"... have mercy on me, Lord, I am the older son? Look at the stages of self-destruction and suicidal harm...

v. 25 his relationship with father is distant and consists of hard, continual labour

v. 26 anger overwhelms him and resentment consumes and controls him

v. 29 he is in danger of complete alienation and isolation... so much promise, so much despair.

And in today's Gospel, can you not hear the father cry out, "Miserere mei, Domine, pater sum"... have mercy on me, Lord, I am the father? I know there are some here who find it very hard to look upon the father with kindness and mercy, but please try... look at the stages of self-destruction and suicidal harm...

v. 12 out of weakness, misplaced love, a longing for peace he accedes to his younger son's request

v. 20 day by day, he longs for his son to return home and poignantly searches the horizon for a sign of his recovery

v. 28 he finds himself in the throes of family dysfunction and seems unable to effect reconciliation and harmony

v. 31 he realizes how poor and fragile has been his relationship with both sons... so much promise, so much despair.

But this need not, and in God's economy, will not ever be the last word!

Carlos Eire writes, "Among the infinite messages conveyed by Jesus at my window in Havana, one stands above the rest in times of trial, those harsh, soul-crushing times none of us can escape... 'This pain, this cross, shall vanish as quickly as I did in your dreams, these stains on your soul shall be wiped clean, just like that lipstick smudge you once had on your cheek...'... it shall be wiped clean!

Joshua is promised that the disgrace of the past shall be “rolled away” and so he is commanded to establish a celebration to remind him and the people of this supreme act of God. What a powerful image... our shame, our pain, our confusion... all is rolled away!

Paul rejoices that, in the power of God, we need no longer see ourselves simply from “a human point of view”... we are, yes we are, being reconciled to God... lifted out of vicious, pernicious cycles of self-destructive and suicidal harm.

Last week Meg spoke eloquently and passionately of the god most of us would prefer... “we want a hero in shining armor that will rescue us before we are hurt or injured. We want a God who will intervene on behalf of the victim. We want a God who will hold towers up, who will keep things from mixing together, who will fast forward time until we are on the other side of the Red Sea. We want a God who will come down from the cross” but Jesus cannot, will not do that. Listen... can you perhaps hear with me a whisper from the Cross... “Miserere mei, deus sum... have mercy on me, I am God”.

The novel concludes, “Dying can be beautiful. And waking up is even more beautiful. Even when the world has changed. Especially when the world has changed. Tu sabes. You know... Imagine killer waves coming up at you, turquoise waters under white Cuba clouds that soak up the tangerine and make it even brighter. Imagine no end of waves. None. No end. Sin fin. En fin, sin fin. Tu sabes”.

You know... we are being changed, we shall be changed... we shall. Amen

© Church of the Holy Trinity Rittenhouse Square. All rights reserved.