

First a quote from Christian de Cherge, the leader of the Christian monastic martyrs at Tibhirine in North Africa.

Our Christian identity is always in the process of being born. It is a Paschal identity.

In the first reading, we see Paul, nearing the end of his life and mission, giving advice to those who will be left to carry on his work, the work of Christ, now including non-Jews as well as Jews and so destined to be universal. A work, then, including such as the Gentile doctor, St. Luke, but a work following the pattern of Christ, involving suffering as well as joy, as we hear in the detail of his letter and his own suffering, caused by false fellow travellers and periods of isolation. Even at the end, he is still struggling, perhaps, with issues of forgiveness and that delicate balance of warning others of the true nature of false friends without demonising them forever. And, in the gospel, we see that first sending out of disciples, again with the warning to discern true from false friends. We once watched the film of the Martyrs of Tibhirine here in our monastic guest house and it provoked a comment from one of the group analysts present that the monks were asking for trouble from the very start of their mission because they represented the colonial power which had formerly enslaved and exploited the people of Algeria so their presence was essentially suicidal. And this perhaps is where that imagery of 'lambs among wolves' comes into play: that certain naïvety which is also needed in mission, in following Christ: the naïve hope that humanity can indeed change and that culture and past history needn't after all be determinative of who we are; that we must take the risk of even false friends if we are also to take the risk of revealing the possibility of grace, of forgiveness. The monks of Tibhirine knew full well the risk they were undertaking but their naïve hope of the possibility of reconciliation, of love conquering all, of resurrection, keeps them going, gives them hope, even in that ultimate trial we all have to face anyway. It's not that Christians look for martyrdom, any more than Christ did, or Paul, but they are called in their naïvety, perhaps, to witness to the essential goodness of God and of creation – until the killing stops.

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