Opinion
NCR Voices
A man speaks through a bullhorn during a protest in Memphis, Tennessee, Jan. 27, on the day

A man speaks through a bullhorn during a protest in Memphis, Tennessee, Jan. 27, on the day of the release of the video showing police officers beating Tyre Nichols, the young Black man who was killed as a result of a traffic stop by Memphis police officers. (OSV News/Reuters/Alyssa Pointer)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 6, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Evil. We pray about it daily: "deliver us from evil." Our Scriptures are quite clear about its existence and its prevalence; indeed, there is no sense in which Israel's yearning for a savior or the Gospels of Jesus Christ make sense, unless he came to overcome evil.

Sometimes we moderns act as if we can explain evil away. A person does something wicked, and we turn to psychology for an explanation, often with good warrant. For example, we conclude a person's evil act grew from a need to control the situation, and that need for control is rooted in a prior wound. Or we learn that a serial child molester was molested himself as a youth. Or, we go to the theater and hear Riff sing, "Hey, I'm depraved on account I'm deprived!" in "West Side Story."

Then we watch the video of five policemen brutally beating Tyre Nichols to death in Memphis Nichols is restrained, no threat to anyone, but the police persist in kicking and hitting him so badly, he died from the attack. That is evil, pure evil.

Or we watch the video of David DePape hitting Paul Pelosi with a hammer. Pelosi is in his pajamas, guilty of nothing more than being married to someone whose politics the assailant despises. That is evil, pure evil.

Advertisement

It is difficult to watch those videos. The video of the beating of Tyre Nichols was the hardest thing I have had to watch since the beheading of Daniel Pearl, a journalist killed by Islamic terrorists in Pakistan. Pearl was 38-years-old, a lovely man and a great journalist. The desire to look away from such evil is enormous and understandable but such moments are an existential demand to all of us to face the evil in the world. In these videos, it is inescapable.

We see the damage caused by a bomb in Ukraine, but we do not see the perpetrator who launched the bomb. We know, ultimately, the responsibility lies with Russian President Vladimir Putin, but it is precisely in the mental steps by which we assign moral responsibility that we ameliorate the immediacy of the evil. We see people dying from floods, and we know that the extreme weather is linked to climate change, but the many steps between our filling our gas tank, and the images of the drowned, all serve to diminish the horror of evil.

The videos of the killing of Nichols and the beating of Pelosi expose that horror in all its rawness: the brutality of it, the indifference of the perpetrators, the senselessness.

Yet, on the Sunday after the video was released, MSNBC's Mehdi Hasan had a discussion with Professors Kimberle Crenshaw and Khalil Muhammed about the killing of Nichols. The professors were keen to argue that their theories about race were not diminished by the fact that both the victim and the perpetrators of the murder of Nichols were Black. In the effort to guarantee this horrible evil was seen as systemic, the particularity of the victim — his history and destiny, in short, his dignity — mattered not a whit. Tyre Nichols, the living, breathing person who had had the life beaten out of him, became a footnote in an academic argument.

Later that night, on Fox News, Steve Hilton put the blame on police morale being low because of the "Defund the Police" movement. Never mind that the "Defund the Police" movement was never much of a movement, and only gained currency because of Fox News' unique ability to take a few ridiculous ideas and claim all liberals hold them. What was horrifying was the way Nichols' death functioned solely as a part of a political argument. Again, the actuality of the evil we saw with our own eyes was lost in the effort to defend an ideological talking point.

Members of law enforcement in San Francisco work outside the home of House Speaker Nanc

Members of law enforcement in San Francisco work outside the home of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Oct. 28, 2022, where her husband Paul Pelosi was violently assaulted after a break-in at their house. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)

I am sure some people warmed to these abstract interpretations of the evil we had just seen. They left me cold. My mind went to an article about grief in The New York Times by the late, great Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete. He wrote, "The roots of grief arise from a wound deeper than the psychological or the cultural. It is at that level in ourselves where we decide what we can or cannot expect of life, what is just or unjust, what is the purpose and value of our existence."

Albacete rejected the notion that any ideas or abstractions can sooth grief. He wrote:

> In this life — even for me, a priest — "life after death" is an abstraction that can never replace the loss of a living, breathing person. I remembered the words of Ivan, stricken by injustice in "The Brothers Karamazov": "I must have retribution, or I shall destroy myself. And retribution not somewhere in the infinity of space and time, but here on earth, and so that I could see it myself. … And if I'm dead by that time, let them resurrect me, for if it happens without me, it will be too unfair. Surely the reason for my suffering was not that I as well as my deeds and sufferings might serve as manure for some future harmony for someone else."

He added, "I suspect that today we are not supposed to expect that much of life. We are supposed to settle for less." I suppose so.

I hope there will be better police training. I hope that our country will continue to pursue its halting, uneven quest for racial justice. More than these, however, I hope that this coming Lent, we moderns can all become better at facing the evil of the world, not turning away, and repenting of it.

And I hope, most of all, that Tyre Nichols has been welcomed into paradise by our savior Jesus Christ, who alone conquers, in fact has conquered, the evil we poor humans seem so incapable of conquering ourselves.