

Homily based on the readings from May 27, 2025 (Acts 16.22-34; John 16.5-11)

While every book of the Bible is an incomparable treasure, there is something special about the Acts of the Apostles. Among all the texts in Holy Scripture, it is the *one* that tells us the most about the *actions* of the early Church – and also about the *character* of the early Christians.

Today's reading – which describes the imprisonment and escape of Paul and Silas – perfectly illustrates the qualities that set the Christian community apart from everyone else at the time – and, in fact, from everyone else *ever*.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of God delivering his servants from the hands of the wicked – Daniel in the lions' den; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace; Queen Esther and the Jewish population of the Persian Empire; and, of course, the Israelites in Egypt. Even though all of these individuals behave nobly and righteously, the one thing they do *not* do is stop to

ensure the well-being of their persecutors. In contrast, Paul and Silas actually take the time to check on their jailer, talk him out of killing himself, and even baptize his entire household. Their *actions* echo the words of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who prayed that the Lord would not “hold this sin against” the people who were murdering him. Both of these situations, of course, hearken back to the words of Christ from the Cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

One of the fundamental principles of Christianity is that no human being – regardless of the terrible deeds he has committed – is ever beyond the reach of God’s salvation. As Christians, it is our duty to do *anything* we can to help *anyone* obtain that salvation, even when – *especially* when – we are the victims of those terrible deeds. This principle does not just apply to Biblical times, but to the entirety of human history.

Although there are countless examples of Christians who have embodied this principle, one that always comes to mind for me is Monsignor Hugh

O’Flaherty. In case you are unfamiliar with that name, Monsignor O’Flaherty was an Irish priest working in the Vatican at the time of the Second World War. During the German occupation of Rome, he spearheaded an effort that saved the lives of approximately 6500 individuals – both Allied soldiers and Jewish residents of Rome. Throughout this period, his chief adversary was an SS officer named Herbert Kappler. Even though Monsignor O’Flaherty was legally protected by both Irish and Vatican neutrality, Kappler repeatedly attempted to orchestrate his arrest, torture, and execution. The accounts of O’Flaherty’s numerous escapes are truly remarkable, but what is infinitely *more* amazing is what happened once the war was over. For his crimes against humanity, Kappler was sentenced to life in prison. For the rest of his life, he only had one regular visitor – not his wife, not his children, not his former colleagues, but Monsignor O’Flaherty. In 1959, after years of talking and praying together, Kappler received the Sacrament of Baptism at the hands of the man he had repeatedly tried to murder.

In our own lives, we may never have to face an evil comparable to that of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, whenever we encounter any form of violence or hatred, we must remember the principle of Paul, Silas, and Stephen – and of Christ himself. It is our duty not only to *endure* the attacks that are directed against us, but to *respond* to those attacks with the love of Jesus Christ. The only way to overcome evil is not by *destroying* the people who commit evil acts, but by *saving* them.