

One of the things that we are confronted with with nonstop news is, unfortunately, a steady stream of bad news. There is so much evil that goes on in the world, and sometimes we may be left to wonder what can I do in the face of it.

But what each of us is called to remember is that we are put here on this earth for a reason. We are given a mission. And as an individual, while it might not seem like we can do much, the truth is when we recognize the capacity for good in our souls, we can, with our Lord, who journeys down the mountain to complete His mission and face evil, truly do so much to bring hope into the world.

It goes without saying for millions during the dark days of World War II, hope was hard to see. Perhaps especially for the people of Germany. And among the many victims of the atrocities of the Nazis is a Jesuit priest by the name of Fr. Alfred Delp, who's life was extinguished by the Nazis, but not his hope - which lives on today through his prison writings, which are still widely read.

In 1947, a volume of his selected writings was published entitled simply “In the Face of Death.” It was a selection of letters and meditations which he wrote between August 1944 and January 1945, while he was in prison in Berlin. He was awaiting trial and execution. He had been charged with high treason and the betrayal of his country for participating in anti-Nazi discussions and for preaching against National Socialism.

Alfred Delp was born on September 15, 1907 in Mannheim Germany, the his father was Lutheran, his mother a Catholic. He was baptized Catholic and raised a Lutheran, and as a teenager wasn't quite sure which path to follow. He had a falling out with the Lutheran pastor, and went to the local Catholic parish and became fully Catholic.

As a youth he looked back as an adult and considered himself a bit of a rascal; but he took school seriously and did well, entering the Jesuit Novitiate in Feldkrich, Austria on August 22, 1926.

He'd receive minor orders and while still in formation became a teacher, and in the early 30s wrote and produced a Christmas play called “The Eternal Advent.” It was performed on December 21, 1933, after which the

school newspaper reported: "The well performed piece so rightly aroused the yearning for Christmas." It was his first step into social commentary as he touched on current issues in German society, as it had 3 scenes: the first, dead soldiers, the second, miners cut off from the outside world because of a tunnel collapse and the third a worker-priest. The scenes presented his understanding of a humanity best by its own desperate circumstances. The meaning of Christmas is developed throughout the play as the hope humans have for being liberated from the extremes of the human condition.

When Hitler came to power, the Jesuit school, Stella Matutina, was forced to close its doors. Delp moved with the school and continued writing, and joined with two theologians, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar in planning on writing "The Reconstruction." Unfortunately it was never finished, but it was to present an alternate society to the one being built by the Nazis. He was ordained a priest in Munich on June 24, 1937, the 400th anniversary of Ignatius of Loyola's ordination.

Though he had hoped to pursue a doctorate in social philosophy, the Nazi Administrator of the University of Munich denied him admission. And so he

remained in Munich, and continued writing for a Jesuit opinion journal. Here he wrote on various topics, some directly challenging National Socialism. One of his most famous was "The Present Moment" written in 1939 where he reflected on the situation of humans in history, and in particular the place and obligation of the Christian in the world.

The Gestapo shut down the paper in April of 1941, and he returned to be a pastor at St. George's parish in Munich. Here he cared for the people, and even helped them clean up after bombing raids which damaged their houses. Another important part of his work at this time was to help Jews, by collecting food and money for them and by aiding their escape to Switzerland.

While he was pastor at Saint George's, he became an instrumental member of a resistance group that had been established. The group met in the town of Kreisau. And their purpose was to prepare for the day that National Socialism fell apart, so that it could reconstruct a just society in its place. The Jesuit provincial, Fr. Augustin Rosch, was also a member along with another Jesuit, and some non-Catholics. They would meet also in Berlin and Munich sometimes in Delp's rectory. At first he didn't participate, just

gave them space and a meal, but then he started contributing talking to them about Catholic Social Teaching.

He was arrested in July 28, 1944. Two Gestapo agents waited outside of his parish for a while and at some time during the Mass, came into the back of the Church, waiting for him to finish. One of them was an old classmate. Perhaps sensing what was coming, his final Gospel at the parish that day was John 14:12-23, where Jesus says “do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid. You have heard me say I am going away and then I will return.”

He said to those waiting outside watching his arrest “I’ve been arrested, God protect you and good bye.” He was taken to Berlin. He was charged with being in a resistance group, participating in resistance discussions, meeting with Claus von Stauffenberg who had tried to take Hitler’s life (though Fr. Delp had no part in it), and having a negative attitude toward National Socialism. The trial in January of 1945 was theater; the judge hated priests, especially Jesuits. The judge condemned him to execution; interestingly the judge, Roland Freisler, was killed the next day in a bombing raid.

Here he was, a man committed to showing others their true freedom in God now deprived of his freedom. A man of God in the hands of the godless. He was killed on February 2, 1945.

But in prison, he wrote his letters, which are meditations on a society that has become faithless and almost incapable of belief. Man's only hope is to respond to his inner need for truth with a struggle to uncover his spiritual freedom. But this, in the introduction that was written by Thomas Merton, a man can't do unless he recovers his ability to hear the voice crying to Him in the wilderness: in other words, he must become aware of his condition before it's too late. Now is the time, says Fr. Delp, to hear God. He doesn't think humanity is abandoned by God, but that humans have become spiritually blind, perhaps most so when we are convinced that we can see clearly without God. Surely he saw this in the nationalism all around him in Nazi Germany.

Delp's message was essentially, "wake up." He was aware of the concentration camps, the war crimes, and the tragedy that so many did what they did without being shocked at themselves. He recognized that we

needed God to correct this - to help us go from blindness so that we could truly see.

But this also meant seeing that the journey to illumination was a journey, as Merton puts it “a journey with an invisible Companion, toward a secure and promised fulfillment not for the individual believer alone but for the community of man to whom salvation has been promised in Jesus Christ.” With Jesus, we have to look at the world which can be so ugly, and get to work. His vision was for humans to wake up; to see God, but to also get to work. Surrendering to God, he says results in regaining “faith in our own dignity, our mission and our purpose in life to the extent that we grasp the idea of our own life flowing forth within us from the mystery of God.” He felt it was important for the Christian to be not afraid, to enter into dialogue with other men, precisely with those they most fear or stand most ready to condemn. In his own words, which could be written today, “The genuine dialogue no longer exists because there are no genuine partners to engage in it. People are frightened. They are scared to stride out firmly and honestly to the boundaries of their potential powers because they are afraid of what they will find at the border line.” He urged humans not to be

focused on themselves, but to immerse themselves in the world to serve others.

His message was one he was willing to die for. At this very moment today, in the Ukraine, a Ukrainian Orthodox Priest is doing the same thing - Fr. Oleg Sknar. He ministers to his flock as the rockets rain down. He prays for parishioners and Ukrainians but also all people of the world to stand up to tyranny - including the people of Russia who have lived under Putin for far too long. Back in 2015 he had opened up his church to provide medical care for Ukrainians who had fought and been injured. It was during this time he was threatened by the Russian officials for providing help to Ukrainians fighting the then Russian-puppet regime. Putin, even now, is using Christianity to spread propaganda; sadly some Russian Orthodox leaders are also assisting him. But in the face of this, Fr. Oleg is saving souls. Near his parish is Babi Yar, a memorial to the 30,000 Jews killed in the Holocaust over 2 days in 1941 (recently hit by a Russian missile). It is a ravine, where men chose to obey orders and kill their fellow man because of their faith. It is a reminder, as Father Oleg stated, that evil still exists and believers of every faith have a duty to resist it. People like him, like Fr. Delp, like Fr. Maximilian Kolbe and an endless list of people. People who

are not going to be silent, but know of the importance of mission and living it out. He's fighting for his country, but also for the truth and speaking to all people.

In the Gospel, we hear the words of the voice, "this is my chosen Son; listen to him."

Listen to Him is certainly what Fr. Delp and others did even when everything around them would say to be quiet. But this isn't easy to hear; even the disciples accompanying Jesus on the way to Jerusalem do not want to hear his words. He's told them I'm on the way to suffer, die and rise, but they'd prefer not to know. So the Lord challenges them to open their ears, and is transfigured in their sight with the voice crying out to listen.

With God, we have a promise of more than we can ever imagine. But following God is not without cost and it will change us. So how do we awake and go on our mission?

First, we wake up. Yes, there are many evils in the world. Yes, things seem to sometimes be so bad with human suffering. Escapism can be tempting. I certainly like to take a nap every so often. I like vacations and getting away too. But as sleep overcame Peter, James and John prior to the transfiguration, we too can be in a spiritual daze. Lent gives us this sacred time to recognize how can I become the person I want to become. We do this with prayer and spending more time with God; with fasting from the things that we can put too much energy in that distract us from God and what really matters, and by almsgiving, not just of finances but of sharing our resources, our time and giving to this world, both by helping the needy and doing what Fr. Delp and Fr. Oleg are doing - speaking out against evil.

We then listen. Peter was talking in the Gospel, but once he piped down he heard what God was telling him. For us, how much do we listen to Jesus, or are we also too busy talking? Make time in Lent for silence or meditation; by all means use what prayers work, but add silence, for in the silence, God can speak loudly. We also will get the clarity the more we pray and more we listen to God to sort out who to listen to. There is so much misinformation in our world today and so many lies that we deal with, from lies about the body, to what it means to be a human, to what we should

think of others who are different from us politically or of a different religion. The more we can hear God the more we can discern the truth and our mission.

We then go down the mountain. Jesus invites the disciples to follow him freely, but they are afraid. Fyodor Dostoevsky tells the story of the Grand Inquisitor in the Brothers Karamazov, who asserts that 'nothing has ever been more insufferable for humanity and society than freedom. In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us; "Better that you enslave us, but feed us." Like St Augustine we may say, 'Make me chaste.....but not yet.' We see this time and again. Note the closing words of the Gospel, which are, frankly, a little depressing if we don't know that the apostles will eventually speak up: "When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." We hear the words of God here at Mass, but also alone, when God is with us. The silence is important, but so too is speaking and then going on the mission. And this is a mission that is for all in the world, and will often be tough.

In our polarized world, it can be so easy to look at people and give up, or to cancel others. Sometimes we think it's too hard to spread the Gospel; we know people who have walked away from the faith, or even in our families a parent may give up on faith formation when their kid loses interest.

Other times we can be quick to judge others as being the people who are all wrong, certainly not us. During World Wars I and II, there was much animosity towards Germans and Japanese in our own nation. We're seeing this now too towards Russians. Hockey players who are Russian are reporting death threats; an Indy car driver was let go from his team just for being Russian. Corporations are quick to virtue signal by closing up in Russia, yet interestingly, not in China. Not being able to get a Big Mac or a Coke isn't a big deal to Putin, who changed the constitution and rules as a dictator, censoring information to his own people. Many Russians are good people who want no part of war or Putin but have no choice. So many of the heroic Christians who are martyrs prayed for their persecutors, and some even converted them. So let us never think that our mission applies to just some, or God's love applies more to us here than it does to any other person on this earth. Our mission is to make sure it is heard.

Going down that mountain isn't easy. No mission is. There's setbacks. There's animosity. There's slow-going. And sometimes there's this sense of powerlessness in the face of evil and apathy and a world gone crazy. Fr. Delp could have kept his mouth shut and lived through the war. But as God chose Peter, James and John, we are chosen too. After he was given his death sentence, Fr. Delp wrote "...one thing is gradually becoming clear - I must surrender myself completely. This is seed time, not harvest. God sows the seed and some time or other he will do the reaping. the one thing I must do is make sure the seed falls on fertile ground." He did that with his soul, but also tried to make the earth fertile in all people to receive it. Like him, we can't give up on this world or one another. We can't fear being canceled. We can't fear being hated. We need to pray. To love. To challenge one another. To not be silent and testify to the truth so others can join us one day atop the mountain gazing upon God forever. So with him, let us journey towards the shared freedom and joy of the Kingdom of Heaven, helping all of our brothers and sisters find their freedom too by weighing the cost and setting out on the mission.