

Over the years, I've seen most of the episodes of the Rod Serling classic "The Twilight Zone," many of which are so timeless looking at some of the things, both good and evil, that humans are capable of.

In one of the more famous episodes, "The Shelter," the Stockton family is having a birthday party for Paul joined by some neighbors. Everyone liked Bill and all is well. But, when on the radio we hear bulletins of possible war with the Soviet Union, the family makes their way to a bomb shelter a man has built. When other's in the neighborhood want to be in there too, he says there is no room for them; but they turn on him, hurling insults at him, suspecting him because of his ancestry and everything buried within comes out, and try to force their way into the shelter. They break the door down, but then we hear that there will be no war, and it was a misunderstanding in that what was thought to be possible missiles were harmless satellites. The people calm down, but Paul wonders allowed will anything ever be the same between us?

The episode is memorable because in real life, as we all know there is inside us all this tendency for evil; we call original sin the "darkening of the intellect" meaning at times we are prone to make poor choices, sometimes

treating others with this hatred based on their politics, their race, or their past; or perhaps we can hate based on the past and what they did to us. Anger is certainly justifiable at times, but this darkness can take over a soul. What if, however, we took a different path, and tried to follow the way of Christ? Fighting not with weapons or anger, but with love and mercy? How might we begin to see one another?

In real life, a woman who chose to see this way is a woman named Immaculee Ilibagiza. Today, she is a Rwandan American author and speaker, author of "Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust," that tells her story of how she survived the horrors of the civil war of 1994 that tore apart Rwanda and resulted in the killing of thousands.

What occurred that year was horrific. The majority tribe, the Hutu, called for the mass slaughter of the Tutsi, the minority tribe as part of the Rwandan Civil War. An estimated 800,000 were killed over a hundred day period.

Caught up in this was a young woman by the name of Immaculee.

As she tells her story today, she says that whenever a stranger hears her accent and asks her where she is from, she wants to answer that she was born in Paradise, as for her, growing up in Rwanda was paradise.

She says her tiny African homeland is so breathtakingly beautiful it's impossible not to see God's hand in her mist-shrouded mountains, lush green hills and sparkling lakes. But it was the beauty of the people that made Rwanda so idyllic to her young heart.

Everyone in her little village got along like a big, happy family. As a youngster she wasn't even aware that the country had two tribes, the majority Hutu which at that time was 7 million of the 8.2 million people who lived there, and the minority Tutsi, of which she was a member.

She never felt unsafe or threatened when she was out playing and she says she was the happiest girl in the world at home surrounded by the warmth and affection of her three doting brothers and the most loving, protective parents imaginable.

Her parents were teachers and looked up to in the community. There was always a place at their table for anyone in need, and people traveled from miles around to seek her parents advice and counsel.

But things were not as they seemed. Her parents had shielded her from the simmering ethnic tensions in their land. When she was 24 years old, those tensions erupted in a storm of violence that forever swept away the paradise she knew as a child.

On April 7th, 1994, the Rwandan president's plane was shot down and extremist Hutu politicians unleashed a diabolic plot. All commerce was shut down and it was announced on the radio that the business of the nation would be killing Tutsis. Seven million Hutus were commanded to pick up a machete and carry out the following orders: Kill every Tutsi you know, kill every Tutsi you see, kill every Tutsi man, woman, child and infant - kill them all, leave none alive.

What happened next was a transformation of people. Hatred enveloped the hearts of people she had known and trusted all her life - neighbors, schoolmates and friends.

When the killing began, hundreds of terrified Tutsi families swarmed to Immaculee's home seeking sanctuary. But when her father saw the heavily armed government militia surrounding their property, he feared the worst and hurriedly pressed his rosary into her hand and told her to run to the pastor's house, saying even though he is Hutu, he was a good man and would hide her.

She spent the next 3 months crammed into a 4 x 3-foot bathroom with seven other terrified Tutsi women as the slaughter raged outside. From where she was Immaculee could hear the screams.

She lived in constant fear of death or worse. She prayed day and night with her father's rosary pleading for God to spare her life, but she learned there was a difference between being spared and being saved. Hatred began taking hold of her heart, just as it had in the killers. She wished them dead; she wanted them to suffer like they were making so many others suffer. Had someone given her a loaded gun, Immaculee says she might have crawled out of her hiding place and tried to kill everyone.

When she said the Lord's Prayer, the words "forgive those who trespass against us" simply would not form on her lips. How, she wondered, could she forgive the unforgivable, forgive those she wanted to kill herself?

The sickening thirst for revenge was foreign to her; her parents raised her to love her neighbor and live according to the Golden Rule. She grew more terrified of what was happening to her soul than what the killers might do to her body - Immaculee remembers not wanting to survive the slaughter if it meant living with a spiteful heart incapable of love.

She prayed for God to show her how to forgive those she had grown to hate. Suddenly, she saw an image of Jesus in the moments before His death, crying out to God from the Cross to forgive those who were crucifying Him.

In that instant, Immaculee realized the killers were children of God who had lost their way. She prayed; "Forgive them Father, they know not what they do." The hatred drained from her and her heart flooded with God's love. For the first time, she was aware of the power of forgiveness to heal and transform - and she says it was the greatest gift she had ever received.

When the killers were finally driven from the country, she emerged from hiding and learned of her family's fate. Her eldest brother survived because he was studying abroad. She lost her father who was shot protecting the families who had come to him for help, and her mother lost her life when she was killed on the street after running out of hiding to help a child, and her youngest brother was also shot with other unarmed Tutsis corralled in a sports stadium. She lost another brother at the hands of former family friends; Immaculee had heard that before he died, he forgave his killers.

Several months after the genocide, a politician friend arranged for her to meet the man who led the murders of her mother and elder brother.

When she arrived at the jail she was stunned by what greeted her. A sick and disheveled old man in chains was shoved onto the floor at her feet.

Immaculee recognized him immediately, and called out his name, "Felicien." He had been a successful Hutu businessman whose children she had played with in primary school. Back then he was tall, proud and handsome with impeccable manners. In front of her now, he was a

hallowed-eyed specter in rags covered in running sores. His hatred had robbed him of his life.

The jailor kicked him in the ribs yelling “Stand up Hutu! Stand up you pig and tell this girl why you murdered her mother and butchered her brother!”

Felicien remained on the floor, hiding his face from her in shame.

Immaculee’s heart though swelled with pity. She crouched down beside him and placed her hand on his. Their eyes met briefly and she said what she had come to say: I forgive you.

Relief swept over her, and a sign of gratitude slipped through Felicien’s parched lips.

The furious jailer said to her what the heck was that about. That man murdered your family, I brought him here so you could spit on him. But you forgave him. How could you do that?

Her response was “because hatred has taken everything I ever loved from me. Forgiveness is all I have left to offer.”

Immaculee turned and walked out of that prison free of anger and hatred, and she says she has lived as a free woman ever since.

Today, Rwanda is largely at peace. But in the world, there will always be anger and hate due to sin. The question for us is what, or a better way of putting it, who, do we want to rule our souls? Who will we fight for and what will we bring into the world? The answer is when we say yes to having Christ as our King, we too can have that kind of moment that Immaculee had, freeing ourselves of anger and hatred, and seeing others as Christ sees them.

On this feast of Christ the King, our readings give us some different understandings of the dimensions of Christ's Kingship, each one important to helping us bring about peace in our souls and in the world.

The first, from our first reading, speaks of David; and Jesus is born in the line of David as we hear towards the end of Advent every year in Matthew's Gospel. David has fought a civil war too; in this case the house of Saul and the House of David were at war over a period of years; David going into the

south. But it comes to an end in David, who unifies all the tribes; and now his former enemies come to him and say you are the shepherd, the commander, and use the key words “your bone and your flesh.” Jesus on the Cross draws all people to Himself, so in Jesus, we see our unity.

Sometimes the people we think we are so different from; the people who are liberal or conservative, the people who never go to Mass, the people who we have some dirt on from their past, the people who once wronged us, the people who make the news for their crimes, whoever it might be, we maybe think they aren't like me; or we think these people have to be defeated. Probably not in the sense of doing the kind of harm as in Rwanda, but anger can take over a heart. And this is not to say we should not strive to defeat ideas and ideologies the evil; but what it does mean is that the person we can't stand, or the person who maybe making bad choices, or holding beliefs contrary to the Church - they are still our brother and sister. And can we start from a position of trying to see them there and trying to help them, rather than let anger and hate take over our heart.

Perhaps we start by praying for them, and then proceed to a conversation or a letter and trying to find common ground, or need to move on to forgiveness like Immaculee. It's not easy, but when we look to Christ who

loved all the same, we can ponder His radical love and make it a reality in our lives step by step.

Second, we see how Christ goes into battle with us and is the answer to evil. Her Catholic faith helped Immaculee through the horrific experience in the war; and this is what Jesus does. Remember from the start, people are trying to kill Him; it starts with Herod, and then when He begins His ministry, the Pharisees and Scribes are out to kill Him, and ultimately Jesus is killed when some of the Sanhedrin and a cowardly Pilate have Him crucified. Jesus at any point could have hidden, He could have been silent. But instead He faces the powers of darkness with love and mercy; He also challenges with this message which gets Him killed, but He is risen. If Christ is our King, we are reminded too we go into battle; Immaculee has told her story to many in her two books but also going all over the world with this message of hope and peace and reconciliation, all rooted in her faith. So how about us? Can we follow our King into battle by being people who are willing to stand against a world that so often says things contrary to our faith, from how you treat people, to how you live, to what defines a person? The temptation can be at times to hide and be quiet, but Jesus goes into the darkness to rescue us; it's up to us to go into the darkness to

of the world and rescue people from hate and evil choices by helping them to see the truth. Remember when Jesus says the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church it doesn't mean we hole up and hope Satan doesn't come through the gates; rather it means we go on offense on the march, for the gate is the weakest point and we can be victorious over evil when we, with our Lord, march into battle with our message of mercy, hope, and doing what we can to help people choose the good.

Lastly, in our gospel we find Jesus having a moment like Immaculee did in that cell with the man who caused her family such harm. In this moment, there is mercy - Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Jesus has the power for revenge too, but does not go that route. Rather He confronts evil and just as Immaculee did, does not give into it. Instead mercy triumphs over it. We see this again when He appears after the resurrection, showing the apostles the wounds and saying "Peace." This is how we too fight evil in the world. By thinking about what we say to others and especially on social media; by forgiving people both in our families and in the greater world; by turning the other cheek; by de-escalating when someone is looking for a fight; by refraining from gossip; by saying to those who are angry I'll pray for you; by taking a deep breath when we find ourselves getting angry. As Immaculee said hatred took everything she

cherished, and so will it do to us if we try to fight evil on it's own terms. Let us instead follow the way of Christ the King.

Though we will hopefully never know the horrors of Rwanda in 1994, all of us experience pain and evil in this world; we are hurt by others, and there are moments where we see sides of ourselves we don't like, where we do things and wonder why do I struggle with that, or why did I say that or act that way. Jesus knows though there is such goodness in each of us; that while at times we can do such evil, far greater is the power of good. And so on this feast of Christ the King, hopefully we make the choice to go with Christ into battle, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to help us evangelize, and using the power of mercy to transform the world through non violent and forgiving love.