

One of my favorite quotes from both books and movies is that of Samwise Gamgee, the loyal friend of Frodo the ring bearer in “Lord of the Rings.” In “The Two Towers” when the journey has become incredibly difficult, and Frodo seems to be thinking of just giving up, Samwise has that famous line:

“It's like the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn't want to know the end because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing this shadow, even darkness must pass. A new day will come, and when the sun shines, it'll shine out the clearer. I know now folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something. That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.”

Sometimes though let's face it the good can be hard to see. We see all that happens in the world, we see the choices people make, and the temptation can be to ignore it; to change the channel; to focus on escaping it; or to encircle ourselves with just like minded people who complain or nod in agreement but fail to do anything. This though can't be the attitude of the

Christian. For like the apostles with Jesus, we go out with Him in the boat that is our Church. He is with us always, but like Elijah who would have to leave the cave, and Paul who as we hear in the second reading “speaks the truth” as he is sent, so are we. As such the challenge is to fight without fear, but to truly go out and make a difference.

102 years ago yesterday, on August 11, 1921, a brave Catholic priest who was sent to America from Ireland did just that, paying with his life when he was shot at point blank range by a Methodist minister. The priest was Fr. James Coyle, and he was praying on the porch of his rectory. The minister, Rev. Edwin Stephenson, took Fr. Coyle’s life in cold blood because he was filled with hate. He was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and his daughter, Ruth, as a young woman at the age of 18, had been attracted to Catholicism and decided to convert, and marry a young man who was a dark skinned Puerto Rican.

Fr. Coyle was known as a champion of poor people and minorities who had come to the Birmingham area to live and work in the steel town.

Born in 1873 to Owen and Margaret Coyle, who were educators, he grew up in Ireland and studied for the priesthood at the Pontifical North American College in Rome. He was ordained a priest at the age of 23 in May of 1896. He was sent to the US to be a missionary priest in Alabama along with his sister, Marcella, who would help him with the housekeeping. He helped build up a boys' school, and when the pastor of Saint Paul's in Birmingham died tragically, being thrown from his horse, he was sent there to be the pastor.

Here, he served until his death. He was devoted to the Mass, and had a marble altar made that is still there today.

The Stephenson family were Methodist. Ruth was the daughter, and the man she married on August 11 was Pedro. She would say later in grand jury testimony that she was convinced to become a Catholic, but this was because she was attracted to the faith.

This was not an era of free-thinking households, especially for women. In the 1920s, big changes came; women were given the right to vote. But the KKK had gone through a resurgence. It was also a time of rampant anti-Catholicism. It was a time when laws were passed that allowed Catholic

convents, monasteries and hospitals to be searched without a warrant. The KKK fueled hysteria that the Knights were the military arm of the pope and were stockpiling weapons and planning an insurrection. It also claimed Catholics were kidnapping Protestant children and women.

Stephenson was technically a minister in the now-defunct Methodist Episcopal Church. His daughter Ruth began taking instruction in the faith from the nuns at the Convent of Mercy; the monster Stephenson brutally physically abused his daughter when he learned of this. But she was undeterred as she grew older.

Stephenson would use his credentials to hang out at the courthouse, which was next door to Saint Paul's. Here he would offer to officiate marriages. On the fateful day, Fr Coyle was at a meeting at city hall, and was told Ruth wanted to get married. When told it was Stephenson's daughter, he said "I guess he's going to kill me." But knowing Ruth and Pedro were of age, and knowing no laws were being violated (for this was a time when black and white people could not legally get married in Alabama), and knowing they were prepared and had the right to celebrate the sacrament, he was willing to have the small wedding. It was him, Ruth, Pedro, and two witnesses

from the church (his sister and another priest). When Stephenson found out his daughter had run away, he became enraged.

Fr. Coyle though went to his porch to say his prayers. Stephenson came up through a gate, walked up at point blank range, and shot 3 times. He received last rites and died that evening. Thousands were there for his funeral, including people of others faiths and another Methodist minister who was appalled at what happened.

Now this crime took place in broad daylight; Stephenson literally had the smoking gun in his hand, went to the courthouse next door, said what he did, and turned himself in. You'd think this would be obvious of what happened next with all of the facts, but what occurred was a travesty of justice.

Joseph Tate, the DA, took a brave step and brought it to trial wanting justice. Stephenson was defended by Hugo Black, KKK member and also future Supreme Court justice. It became the OJ Simpson trial of the 1920s; the New York Times and national papers covered it. Sadly the jury, all white men, some KKK members, despite Tate saying to them: "If you go

into the jury room and throw out the evidence and render a not guilty verdict, gentleman of the jury you will have all narrow minded red neck people pat you on the back but for the remainder of your lives you will have your conscience to prick and sting you” did not sway them. He was found not guilty after the deliberation of just a few hours.

The last words of Fr. Coyle were “give until it hurts” and he did just that. He allowed black people into his church which wasn’t common. he founded the first black school in Birmingham. He kept his church open during the Spanish Flu pandemic so people could come to Mass. And he brought people together, the exact opposite of what the klan does; thousands of men and women from all faiths were at the funeral.

The effects of what he worked for, peace and justice, are still being felt. While his voice was silenced, because of his bravery, so many were helped, from Ruth and Pedro, to the marginalized and oppressed in Birmingham at the time. But this happened because a man was willing to be not afraid. To go out into the storm with his God. So, how about us?

The starting point is to remember that God is always with us. My sense is this is what caused Fr. Coyle to have the wedding, and to pray on his porch. The Risen Christ is not physically with us in the sense He was with the apostles while He walked the earth, but we can think of him in heaven, on the mountain praying. It's here He intercedes for us and His Church. It's here He guides us. This is important to remember when we deal with the challenges of life from our own mortality to sudden illness to the horrible things we as humans do to one another. In the midst of this, there is our God. Note Jesus walks on water during the fourth watch of the night; the darkest part of the night before the dawn. The apostles recognize that this is no ordinary human being; thinking Jesus is a ghost Jesus reassures them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." He is asserting His divinity, and this is the same message that Fr. Coyle heard that guided him to not hide in his church but to openly live his faith and do the right thing. His murderer looked to humans for salvation, namely the klan; Coyle looked to God. The Klan protected Stephenson, but at the cost of his soul. God will never abandon us.

With that, we seek God and try to listen to Him. Elijah hears God in the tiny whispering sound. When we make time for prayer and silence, we hear

God. We are given strength for our mission. When we come to the altar and hear the words of the Eucharistic Prayer and receive our Lord, we are fed for the journey. Sometimes in the midst of a turbulent world, or being so busy and on the go, when we make time for really entering into prayer, to the Mass, and to silence, we can hear how God speaks to us. We can also get answers to how to handle tough situations, or also answers on how to even handle ourselves for sometimes we are afraid of ourselves the most; afraid of what others might think if our sins were exposed, afraid of having to maintain a perfect saintly image. Of course on our own we always will sink like Peter; but God is there to pull us out if we would only take His hand, which is always there for us. In every storm, we have to look to Jesus - not to what frightens us be it our sins, the world, being hated by others, because we do that and we're overwhelmed. We look to Christ and He will give us the power to face those storms.

And lastly, we go out. The boat symbolizes the Church going through time and space; sometimes the waters are smooth, sometimes they are treacherous. Jesus invites Peter to come to him. Though he sinks on his own, Jesus rescues him, and Peter will again go out after the Pentecost. This is what we do as well. We need to be Fr. James Coyle in this world. In



the story on Fr. James, interviewed was the current pastor of Saint Paul's Fr. Bryan Jerabak, and he said in the time of Fr. Coyle, there was discrimination and we still have that. There was violence against Catholics but we still have that. There are changing social mores that made Catholics feel on the outs of society and we still have that. There are many storms out there. There is relativism, that says do what you want. There are attacks on us for how we live our faith. There is animosity when we stay to a world this is immoral and not right, when we stand up for the unborn, the poor, the immigrant, marriage as between a man and a woman, and the social teachings of the Church. Fr. Coyle would not have been shot if he hid in his church or just said Mass. But he knew he had to get in the boat and help change the world as a person of hope, not just complain about it to like-minded people. Hopefully that is something we too understand.

Fear can be overwhelming in our lives, but as Saint John Paul said "I plead with you, never, ever, give up on hope, never doubt, never tire, and never become discouraged. Be not afraid." May we heed those words knowing as he did and as Fr. Coyle did that we can look to Christ who will never let us sink but will always be with us. But may we also know that there is good in this world worth fighting for. It's what God believes which is why Jesus

died, and why Fr. Coyle died too. No matter what time we live in, there will always be sin and evil, and the devil wants so much for us to do nothing about it or to give up. Jesus though challenges us to change the world as a people of hope. So with our Lord, let us not be afraid to get in the boat and head out in the waters for we have a job to do - which is to combat hate and evil with hope, love and mercy, something we do with the Lord at our side. So together, let us walk on water with our Lord and change this world.