

Sts. Mary and Joseph Parish, Salem, NH – Palm Sunday 2018

“He saved others. He cannot save himself.” (Mk 15:31)

Two days ago, in the town of Carcassonne, France, an Islamist terrorist killed four people and wounded fifteen others. He went on a shooting spree through the town till he reached a supermarket and there, held 50 people hostage. Some escaped through emergency exits, but others were forced to stay there within the killer’s range. How could they be freed?

One man, Lieutenant-Colonel Arnaud Beltrame, discerned and decided what was the right thing to do. He gave himself up as a ransom for the supermarket hostages. The terrorist accepted the exchange, and the military police officer went in the store alone. Quickly, the terrorist shot and wounded him fatally. The military police took over the store and took out the killer, but too late. Mr. Beltrame died last night as a result of the injuries he sustained. This hero was 44 years old, exactly my age. He was a “revert” and had recently become even more committed to his Catholic faith. The priest who ran to give him the last rites had lately been preparing him to marry his civil wife in church.

Yesterday, women and children came to lay flowers by the main gate to the military police barracks in Carcassonne. When asked why by journalists, they grimly but gratefully say: “I want to thank him for giving his life to save us” and “He died for us.” The very words we use to talk about our friend and Savior, Jesus Christ, who set us such a moving example almost 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem.

How ironic that in today’s Passion reading, the chief priests and the scribes use those very words to mock Jesus: “He saved others; he cannot save himself.” In their mockery, however, they are telling the truth: by his life and death, Jesus saved those who believed in him. But he would not save himself; he would not take himself down from the Cross. He stayed on it for our sake, He accepted the sacrifice required of him to save us all; he gave up his own life in ransom for our sins. He entered the supermarket of our lives and handed himself over to the power of death so that we would live.

Therefore, his example questions you personally, brother and sister. In your everyday life, at home and in the workplace, on the road and at the mall. In extraordinary circumstances too, perhaps, like Mr. Beltrame. What feelings, thoughts, words, and deeds, does Jesus’ example inspire you? Are you ready, in all you do, to lovingly give your life and strength for others, at your own cost?

You need not be heroic; you need not feed the headlines on the evening news. But ask yourself in all honesty, as uncomfortable as it may be: what propels you, self or love?

Fr. Nicolas Steeves, SJ – Visiting priest