

## Treasure at Norwalk

*Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide moneybags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. (Luke 12:32-34)*

I don't know why I went to see *Dhobi Ghat*, a newly released Bollywood movie. It is set in Bombay and deals with social classes and trying to survive. During the movie, I suddenly understood why I was there.

Since returning from the prison at Corcoran last week I have been stuck with so many feelings. Watching the movie my confusion, pain, joy, and hope became clearer. Maybe all these feelings aren't meant to be understood but just acknowledged.

In the movie there is a laundry boy who washes the clothes of the rich. His brother is killed in gang violence. The contrast between the living conditions of these classes is vivid and disturbing. It reveals a deep and vast chasm between the teeming masses living in squalor and the pampered rich.

On February 7, a group of students and teachers from eight high schools came together at Southern Youth Correctional Facility in Norwalk. Fifty students from the outside and fifty students locked up at the institution came together from 10 am until 2 pm.

Throughout the movie, the familiar melodic pounding of the rain of Bombay as it falls on the tin roof of the laundry boy's hovel became constant. The rain also fell onto the spacious verandah of the very wealthy Indian banker. I felt the power of the colors used by the painter, who found his muse in the inspiration of letters done in video by a beautiful Indian wife betrayed by her cold husband.

What did I feel as the rain poured down and seeped through the cracks of the roof? I felt a constant pounding, like the sadness portrayed in the haunted faces.

The sentences of Justin, Steven, and Andrew, three kids locked up in Norwalk, add up to one hundred and twenty eight years in prison - 38 plus 50 plus 40 years. 128 years. What are those kids from the high schools going to be doing in twenty-nine years? What are Justin, Steven, and Andrew going to be doing in twenty-nine years?

The laundry boy goes back to his shack in the hovels and poverty of Bombay, the banker returns to her spacious apartment overlooking the ocean. Nothing in the movie made sense. It was a snapshot of social injustices, great movements of the heart in the midst of so much absurdity.

The high school students walked out of the youth prison at 2:30. The youth who were locked up went back to the routine of prison. Some of the students went home to a warm healthy dinner

around a happy table. Those at Norwalk were looking at the same food that they had been served for many nights while being locked up.

I felt the pounding rain fall furiously within me; wondering why life has to be like this.

During the meeting today there was a piece of my heart that was proud of the kids that had once been part of the meditation group at the juvenile hall in Sylmar. Here they were articulate, secure in themselves, and smart enough to know that they could make a few points with the young ladies sitting next to them at their tables. I give them credit, for they are survivors, and can use their own resources to go forward.

While I was sitting there during the sessions of the students, I could not help but think of Jose whom I had recently visited at Corcoran. He kept saying how tired he was of being a prisoner. There was a heaviness in speaking with someone who senses that they are never going to escape from the walls that close them in: what do you say?

The rain on the tin roofs falls through cracks. What do we do with the constant rain of tears that fall within?

Youth! Life sentences! Kids! Ending a life!

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Today was the birthday of Andrew - one of the kids who is locked up. This kid was on suicide watch for so long at Sylmar. His life sentence destroyed him, and he was filled with so much inner rain that he was drowning. He would always cry saying, "Why can't I have another chance? Why?" The pounding rain fell through the cracks of the roof of the hovels.

Being with these kids surrounded by young women reminds me of the times I visit them with their parents. The scene today was very different from the last time I said Mass at Norwalk and then spent time with them afterwards. At that time they were at their worst. This afternoon they were at their best. Cut off for so long from pretty young women will mean that they will be on their best behavior, desiring to shine, and even daring to speak in front of an intimidating group.

But what I felt mostly tonight was that this "walking with" requires one to develop certain skills, skills like a deep-water diver. The ones who are drenched with the absurdity of rain falling through the cracks bring you to the very bottom of the ocean. The question is whether you have the oxygen to dive to the bottom? The absurdity, the sadness, and despair of the situation bring you there; to the very bottom.

Reflecting on Corcoran these days reminds me how important it is to learn these diving skills in order to be able to dive deep, not just for yourself but for others who also sink to those depths. Last Friday at Corcoran, I was speaking with Jose who said, "Fr. Mike, the reason I can talk with you is because you, in your own way, feel what youngsters who have life sentences feel like,

even though you have never felt it.” He looked me in the eyes and said, “I see that pain in your eyes.” This comment was a little disconcerting and made me feel a little nervous. I still wonder what this solidarity with others - the intensity of pounding rain - does to the heart.

Earlier that day at Corcoran, when I was saying goodbye to Javier, he said, “What are you saying to me, Fr. Mike, when you look me in the eyes and say goodbye?” I replied, “What do you think?” He said, “I’ve looked into lots of killer’s eyes and of course that’s not what I see, but I feel something strong, a kind of spiritual connectedness.” Again I like to read others, but when they read me I get off balance and their words make me think a lot about the discipline of deep-sea diving.

So after spending an entire day with kids who are given cruel and unjust sentences, and with kids who are going to be future judges, I have tears falling inside and out.

The movie showed how we treat as normal the divisions of "haves and have-nots": how rain falls. All this stirred many things within me. Maybe it was about God.

Maybe it was about God identifying himself as a prisoner, wet with the pouring rain, identifying with this class of wet ones. The darkness of gangs, drugs, violence, politics and treachery mingle with the rain. God is within all of this. God is caught in the mix of the absurdity of life. The rain falling; the rain falling on the tiled balcony overlooking the ocean. God was there in that small room of the laundry boy. God was there in Norwalk in the greatness of all the youth gathered. God was there in their voices, in their pain, and in their joy.

Today spoke of the feelings of the deep-sea diver. I feel grateful for what I found at the bottom of the sea. Grateful that I found at the bottom what others have thrown out as not worth anything.

Today the treasure found at the bottom of the sea was revealed again. It is a treasure that was thrown out as trash: kids who have committed mistakes and been thrown out to die in prison. The high school kids saw, felt, and experienced the absurdity to sentence kids to die in prison, like the rain falling on the poor while others dine in comfort. The kids from the outside experienced this treasure in Justin, Steve, and Andrew, condemned to be locked up for 129 years. They experienced God who always dives down to the bottom of the sea to identify with those who are thrown out by the saved.

Some lost treasure was found today at Norwalk.