

MY "QUIET" CHRISTMAS – a homily by Sam Harrell given among friends at St. Julian's on January 6, 2008.

Yes, that's what I wanted for Christmas. Peace and quiet in the mundane sense. As the busiest year ever was being frantically concluded, I was ready, having done my best to wrap up unfinished business related to our work in Kenya's 8 provinces, to relax, go nowhere, see no one and just enjoy a serene environment with my family. I got my wish, but not in the way I had expected.

Several days into this bliss came the period of general elections in Kenya. We were excited about this. Eager for the possibility of a change that would accompany the ringing in of the new year. Eager for a sense of hope among our fellow Kenyans that things might somehow be different than the pervasive status quo that leaves one empty of possibility. And change we did get, just not the one we anticipated.

Being a junky of Kenyan politics, I sat on the edge of the couch watching as the returns rolled in. Staring in ecstasy at the screen that was telling us that the old was out and the new was in. But then the process began to take too long. Not only were my kids complaining that I was taking up too much time on the TV, but the country began to moan at the prospect that something was amiss. In the end, we were all disappointed - my kids, me and our country.

But there was another disappointment as events unfolded. Again, one that I hadn't anticipated. Here we were, safe, secure and well-fed in our cocoon of tranquility, and the country began to erupt around us. To say that we were unaffected would be to trivialize the circumstances. Yes, we were and are affected. But for this brief period, we just sat there waiting. Waiting for what might happen; waiting for news; waiting for things to get worse or better; waiting for who knows what.

Well, we did get news, and it wasn't good. We did see things happening and we didn't like what we saw. Things did get worse. But here's the difficult part. We remained largely unaffected. Since we couldn't drive anywhere (due both to safety and dwindling fuel stocks), or see much of anything (live broadcasts were banned), we relied instead on sms and phone messages from our colleagues and friends in the most affected areas. The stories they told were chilling and unnerving. I remained disappointed because I couldn't really do anything. There was a veil of safety between me and what was going on "out there."

We have a porch balcony that looks over the most serene of landscapes. You would never know you were in the middle of a city of 3 million. A babbling brook flows at the bottom of our yard and birds of all kinds come to visit our garden. Monkeys give the dogs a run for their money and the gentle breeze makes our glass chimes tinkle. It is truly a place of solace and re-creation. We are blessed. But "out there," people were dying, things were falling apart and all we could see was the occasional wisp of smoke or the faint hint of distant voices shouting in excitement or alarm as events unfolded. We were trapped in our tranquility.

On December 31st I woke up and read, as I often do, a daily meditation that comes to me from the Center for Action and Contemplation. In it the author, Richard Rohr, quotes from John Paul II's encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, regarding *solidarity*. Here is what he says:

He (Pope John Paul II) says the best name today for agape love, for perfect Christian love, is *solidarity*. We thought solidarity was being nice and affirming, but ultimately it's to stay in there with brokenness and let it lead you where it will, and to be willing to pay the price. It led Jesus to the cross.

I think solidarity with pain, with weakness, even with the signs of death in society might be the best name for love in the world today, especially for masculine love, a side of love expressed by both men and women. None of us would choose to be nailed to the cross, or freely take the side of the victims in society. Circumstances will unwittingly trap us there, and finally there will be no noble way out.

We're not converted willingly; we're converted in spite of ourselves. Step by step, God seduces and draws us into solidarity.

I began to reflect on the missionary community of which I consider myself a fringe member. We often get distracted by fears over security, co-opted by a desire for convenience and comfort, consumed by longings for family, friends and the hypothetical life 'over there.' Many these days do not take the time or make the effort to learn the 'language of the people' or the customs and traditions the lay under the surface and can shed light on a great many things. Many of us are so caught up in our own little world that we end up ministering more to each other than we do otherwise. We're "here" but are we really "here?"

Today we celebrate the Lord's table. If ever there were a reminder of our humanity and our solidarity with Christ and each other, this is it. During this meal, we not only rejoice in God's provision, we recognize our responsibility to provide. We not only receive the gift of presence, we are admonished to be present in the lives of others – *especially* those who suffer, who mourn, who are imprisoned by whatever means, and who require us to give what we do not, of ourselves, have. In taking the bread and the wine, we forsake the quietness that lulls us to sleep and embrace the uncertainty that propels us forward to do the work of God.