

Do We Dare?

Why do you suppose that Jesus is warning his friends about what the future holds?

After all, in those days, the Roman Empire was very tolerant of a wide range of religions.

By the time of Jesus' public ministry, the Romans conquered most of the known world and as a result had hundreds, if not thousands of religions under its umbrella.

So why should a small band of Christ worshippers cause the Romans to behead St. Paul, to crucify St. Peter, and to feed many more to wild beasts?

Some think of Christianity simply as a personal faith, a private, one to one relationship with Jesus.

It is that, but not only that.

A purely private faith doesn't invite attacks from the powers that be.

Something else, something that lies at the very heart of the Gospel, that's what gets Jesus warning his friends today; that's what gets Paul and Peter and all the other martyrs killed.

At the heart of the gospel is a message so repugnant, so inflammatory, that it gets them all killed.

The outrageous and inflammatory message at the heart of the gospel is that God is the owner of this world; and all that is in it; and all who occupy it.

It's an outrageous and inflammatory message because, let's face it, most of us are convinced that WE are in charge, and IF there's a God, then once God did his creation thing, he handed us the keys and said "good luck!"

But that's not the Word we get from Jesus!

The Word that we get from Jesus is that God is not a distant, disinterested God, but the God who is closer to us than our breath.

The God who, every moment of every day, right here, right now, is willing all that is into existence, yes, sun, moon and sky, and also every hair on your head, every finger on my hand.

We live and move and have our being within the womb of God.

Sit with that image for a moment.

Then sit with the image of God causing all of creation to exist, not at some distant time in the past, but constantly doing so in the ever present NOW.

No wonder we gather each week to say thank you.

And there is this.

God is also a God who suffers with us in our suffering.

God is a God who knows the heights and depths and anxiety of deep suffering.

Jesus sweating blood in the garden asking that the cup be lifted from him.

Jesus weeping at the tomb of his dearest friend Lazarus.

Jesus, crying out on the cross: "My God my God why have you forsaken me?"

In Jesus, God knows, through bitter experience, our sufferings, our anxieties, our needs.

The early Christians stepped into the shoes of Jesus after his ascension because they came to know and love this vulnerable God who walks right next to us.

And because they came to know and love this vulnerable God, these early Christians refused to bow to the idols of Rome: they refused to bow to the stone idols of Zeus and they refused to bow to the living idols, the emperors.

They refused to pay even insincere lip service to the gods of Rome, and that gets them killed.

Jesus sees it coming.

So he warns them.

What is God saying to us in the warning Jesus gives this morning?

We often think that people died for the faith only a long time ago.

We often think that there are no martyrs in recent memory.

Except there are.

In two weeks, on December 2, it will be the 38th anniversary of the martyrdom of Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan; three nuns and a lay missionary.

I was privileged to know all of them and Sr. Maura was a dear friend.

A group of us used to spend weekends with her parents in Far Rockaway, New York; an old Irish couple with white hair and fabulous smiles.

Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean were murdered by those in the country named for our Lord, El Salvador.

They were murdered by those who were threatened by the Gospel of radical friendship, of economic justice, of uncompromising love.

Every day in the Middle East and in parts of Africa, Christians are abducted, beaten and even murdered because of their faith.

Yet, we can bring it even closer to home.

What happens to people who allow God to grasp them, who surrender their will to God (as in "Thy will be done")?

What happens to Christians today if we object to spending three-quarters of a trillion dollars each year on weapons and people dedicated to war?

What happens to Christians who work to support single mothers with real money, real jobs and real safe homes so that abortion can be drastically reduced AND who work to end capital punishment: because all life is sacred?

What happens to Christians today if we reject the gratuitous sex and degrading language that contaminates our televisions and tablets under the guise of entertainment?

What happens to Christians today if we insist that wealth be distributed fairly; that healthcare is a basic human right; that no child should go to bed hungry or cold?

A young teacher in Arizona is on trial for a second time in federal court.

His alleged crime?

Providing food and water to migrants crossing our border.

A group called the Plowshares 7 awaits sentencing in Georgia, also in federal court.

Their crime?

Pouring blood over and protesting the existence of nuclear weapons designed to exterminate whole populations.

We Christians make up over 1/3 of the world's population.

One out of three profess Christ as Lord and Savior.

What a force we'd be if we dared to embrace the deep scandal of the gospels: that God owns this world, and all that is in it, and all who occupy it!

What a force we'd be if we'd embrace, here and now, obedience to Jesus, which IS obedience to God!

Jesus knows that such obedience often carries with it a steep price.

When Jesus tells his friends to pick up their cross and follow, it's obedience that leads to the cross.

And yet obedience, as frightful as it sometimes seems, is the only way to real hope, to genuine freedom, to lasting salvation.

Doing things our way, whether by building the Tower of Babel or proudly saluting military might, whether by admiring the Temple in Jerusalem or surrendering our souls to "our way of life"; doing things "our way" leads only to division, to separation, to death.

It is obedience to God that opens a path to the unexpected, to the delightful, to the truly miraculous.

We hear it when the prophet envisions a world so different from the world in which we now live, a world where:

"The wolf and the lamb feed together, and the lion eats straw like the ox . . . where they shall no longer hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain."

God's way offers a different way to live life; a different way to relate to one another, and the path to that new way is "obedience."

Which we practice when we live out the true challenge of Christ, the challenge to live lives of equality, of compassion, of justice seasoned with mercy.

We practice that obedience in the breaking and sharing of the bread and of the cup; where each of us, no matter our class, race or gender, extend hands to receive the very One whose hands we are to be in the world today.

We practice that obedience in our prayers, in fighting for a just wage, and in worship.

Today, Jesus gathers us together with the 12 disciples, and asks two questions:

What will happen to us if we live out the life changing call of the gospel?

And, perhaps more pointedly, what will happen if we don't?

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