

Living the Faith

When you think about it, why is Jesus warning his friends about what the future holds? The Roman Empire, in those days, was very tolerant of a wide range of religions. After all, 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 bring that kind of attack 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.

It's the message of the Gospel that is so repugnant, so inflammatory, so outrageous, so upsetting that got them all killed. That scandalous message is that God is the owner of this world; of all that is in it; of all who occupy it. Not a distant, disinterested God, but the God who is closer to us than our breath. The God who, every moment of every day, wills all that is into existence. And as such, there can be no other gods.

Our fathers and mothers in faith knew this truth to their core. It shapes who they are and what they do.

What so infuriated the Romans was that these 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. That's what got them killed. Jesus sees it coming. So he warns them.

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

We often think that people died for the faith only a long time ago. There are no martyrs in recent memory. Except that there are.

In a few weeks, on December 2, it will be the 30th anniversary of the martyrdom of Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan; three nuns and a lay missionary, murdered by those in El Salvador who were threatened by the Gospel of radical friendship, of economic justice, of uncompromising love. Only this past week, scores of Christians were kidnapped and murdered in Iraq.

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 will

happen to Christians today if we object to spending three-quarters of a trillion dollars each year on weapons and people dedicated to war? What will happen to Christians who work to support single mothers with real money, real jobs and real safe homes so that abortion can be eliminated AND who work to end capital punishment: because all life is sacred, because only God can give life, and take life?

What will happen to Christians today if we reject the gratuitous sex and degrading language that contaminates our land under the guise of entertainment? What will happen 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?

We Christians make up over 1/3 of the world's population. One out of three profess Christ as Lord and Savior. One out of three are baptized into the death and new life promised by our Lord. What a force we could be if we dared to embrace the crucible of adversity. A crucible we enter every time we say "yes" to the God who is all in all. What a force we could be if we embraced, here and now, obedience to Jesus, obedience to God.

Such obedience carries with it a price, often a steep price. When Jesus tells his friends to pick up their cross and follow, he is speaking of this obedience. Yet, this obedience, as fearful as it sometimes seems, is the way to hope, to laughter, to salvation. Following our own ways, whether it is building the Tower of Babel, or the Temple at Jerusalem, or building military might, or putting our faith in our system of economics, our way leads only to division, to separation, to death.

Obedience to God's way opens a path to the unexpected, to the delightful, to the truly miraculous. We hear it today from Isaiah: "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . 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; a different way. . .

We find that way on the path called "obedience." We practice that obedience when we live with each other the true message of Christ, a message of equality, of compassion, of mercy, and justice. We practice that obedience in the breaking and sharing of the bread and of the cup; where each of us, no matter our differences, extend hands to receive. We practice that obedience in our prayers, in economic redistribution, and in worship.

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

What will happen to us if we live the gospel?

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

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