

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Easter V

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Jesus gathers his disciples for dinner, and in the thickness of the dark night, bids them farewell. Jesus speaks in a way that raises questions among his friends. Thomas wants to know where. Philip wants to know who. But in each case, Jesus offers an explanation that doesn't seem to mitigate the raging confusion. He first calls on them not to be troubled. Troubled by what? Believe in God, believe also in me, he says, in my father's house, there are many dwelling places. In fact, I am going to prepare a place for you. So that where I am, you may also be. This was more than a sure promise to the disciples, it became the source of their motivation. And in so far as the brutal death of Jesus was not enough to hold him in the tomb, they concluded that God's faithfulness was more than trustworthy. That they can in fact trust in the God of Jesus to raise those who die, even as a result of their faith.

The post-resurrection experience of the disciples and many who became part of the new movement was such that they could now look at their own mortality through a different lens. They could now call upon Christ, the one who is the truth, in order that he (Christ) may lead them on the way unto himself. And by walking this truth they may be made alive, at present by faith in him and in the future by actual attainment of everlasting life. For this reason, folks could now endure untold pain and hardship in defense of the way, because they could look toward being at home with the God who had a room prepared for each of them.

I met a gentleman at the Home and Garden Festival last week. His table was next to ours. In our conversation, he shared a story about the movie *Silence*. He asked if I had seen that movie. I responded that I had not. He then gave a summary of the movie, and then opined about the extent to which people can hold on to their faith in the face of suffering and even death.

In the gospel story, we do not read about a Jesus who promised that being practitioners and messengers of the way, the truth and the life will be devoid of fear, suffering or even death. However, the question is, what assurance does faith offer that you and I and many others have been and are willing to endure pain and even death for its sake? What questions does faith answer that makes us reject apostasy? Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is taken outside the walls of Jerusalem and is stoned to death because of his faith. I am sure that if he had recanted, he would have been left off the hook. But he doesn't recant; rather, he opens his eyes toward heaven as he felt the heavy weight of the stones pummel him at different parts of his body. He could only surrender himself into the arms of the one who asked him not to worry or to fear. Stephen could only rejoice in the fulfilling experience of seeing the heavens open with the Son of Man standing by the right hand of God. The big picture for me is that his murder serves as the basis upon which humanity had to be saved in the first place. His killing is a symbol of the magnitude of the human predicament-one fueled by love of power and not justice.

St Augustine writes in the *Trinity* that "...the devil would have to be overcome not by God's power but by his justice. What after all could be more powerful than the all-powerful, or what creature power could compare with the creator's? The essential flaw of the devil's perversion made him a lover of power and a deserter and assailant of justice, which means that men imitate him all the more thoroughly the more they neglect or even detest justice and studiously devote themselves to power....

So it pleased God to deliver man from the devil's authority by beating him at the justice game, not the power game, so that men too might imitate Christ by seeking to beat the devil at the justice game, not the power game." Augustine's thought not only represents for me an answer to the question of a faith that calls me to justice, but like Peter indicated, we are all called, we are chosen as special people by God to pursue God's mighty justice.

The gospel of John opens with the prologue of the Word becoming flesh, and dwelling among us. But the Word as experienced by Philip and his friends was different from their knowledge of the Father. Jesus, however, points out to them that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father, and so why ask to see the Father? Jesus asked Philip. In fact, the incarnational nature of John's gospel helps us to understand that Jesus Christ was able to be a true man only if he was mortal, only if he could succumb to death like any human; and it is only through his death that human nature became stripped of mortality, for the sake of its ultimate union with God.

To me, this conviction of faith doesn't spring forth from belief in immortality-who wants to be immortal? The conviction of faith relies on our belief in the righteousness of the God who seeks to rectify every wrong. The conviction of faith is not about being morally right, it is about being liberated from forces too strong for us to control. It is a call to be Christ-like, just so we can abandon material things, walk in the ways of God with reverence, follow the steps of Christ with joy, willingly bear our cross with exaltation, exist in the flesh as a spirit for whom this world is death and for whom removal from this world through death is life in union with Christ.

Jesus preached about eschatological hope and the new way that God was acting in the life of Israel. That hope lay in transforming the community into one in which they will indeed function as the light to all nations.

Hear Jesus plead with his friends in the gospel story, that if they did not believe in him, at least they can believe in the works, because they were there, they saw the healing of the sick, the feeding of the multitude with five loaves and 2 fish, the restoration of sight of the blind, turning water into wine, calling Lazarus from the dead and the restoration of those on the margins of society.

They, in fact have been witnesses to the acts of God in the ongoing transformation.

I wrote in the weekly Happenings that I could fill pages with stories of my mother. She is a person of deep faith and prayer. She used to wake me and my siblings up at 5:00 a.m. to pray. My faith was in part shaped by her faith. She pointed me to the way and the truth that leads to life. Not simply life as we know it, but a life that sees and recognizes Jesus as the goal of all things.

She taught me that God was the Lord of the Dance, and participation in the Dance meant abandoning all pretenses, and whereas openly acknowledging my identity as a sinner in bondage, also realizing in the same breath that Christ by his unconditional love has already won the victory for us all. More importantly, she encouraged me to recognize God's love not only from the bottomless pit in which I may find myself, but to look upward towards God's heaven where I am guaranteed a room-there is a room in God's house for everyone, even me.

Today, we honor all mothers. One of the joys of my ministry here has been my interaction with mothers. I see a bit of my mother in all the mothers I have met here. And I am grateful to the mother who taught me that to love like a mother is the way to God's heaven, which has a room for everyone; and that way has never been known to be exclusive, and to be compassionate like a mother is the truth through which life abounds in all its fullness. I am grateful for my mother, and I hope you are also grateful for your mother. Happy Mother's Day!! Amen