

Endings

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 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, that gets them all killed.

The deep scandal of the gospels is that God is the owner of this world; of all that is in it; of all who occupy it.

Which is an outrageous message to those who believe THEY are in charge, who insist that IF there is a God, then once God did his creation thing, he left us alone to fend for ourselves.

But that is not the Word that we get from Jesus, no indeed.

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, including sun, moon and sky, including every hair on your head, every finger on my hand.

Sit with that image for a moment: of God causing all of creation to exist, not in 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.

This past week we have all witnessed the horrific devastation caused by the typhoon in the Philippines.

Many of you are from the Philippines, most from the north, but perhaps you have family or friends among those who have endured the worst of this disaster.

They are your fellow countrymen and they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And while we will take a second collection both today and next Sunday for their benefit, and while I will read a bit later an important message from our Bishop about this tragedy, let us now remember that no matter the calamity, God is near, God is faithful, and God finds ways to transform death into life, even, and perhaps most especially, when all seems hopelessly lost.

Our fathers and mothers in faith knew this truth to their core.

That conviction shapes who they are and what they do.

What so infuriates the Romans is that these Christians refuse to bow to the idols of Rome: they refuse to bow to the stone idols of Zeus and they refuse to bow to the living idols, the emperors.

They refuse to pay even insincere lip service to the gods of Rome.

That's what gets 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.

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

Except there are.

In a few weeks, on December 2, it will be the 33rd anniversary of the martyrdom of Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan; three nuns and a lay missionary, murdered by those in the country named for our Lord, El Salvador, 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 eliminated AND who work to end capital punishment: because all life is sacred, because only God can give life, and take life?

What happens to Christians today if we reject the gratuitous sex and degrading language that contaminates our land 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?

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 can be if we dare to embrace the deep scandal of the gospels: that God is the owner of this world; of all that is in it; of all who occupy it!

What a force we can be if we embrace, here and now, obedience to Jesus, obedience to God!

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

When Jesus tells his friends to pick up their cross and follow him, he is speaking of this obedience.

Yet, this obedience, as fearful as it sometimes seems, is the only way to real hope, to genuine laughter, to lasting salvation.

Following our own way, whether it is building the Tower of Babel, or admiring the Temple at Jerusalem, or proudly saluting military might, or putting our faith in "our way of life"; 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, as he envisions a world so different from the world in which we now live, as he envisions the world as God intends it to be, and as God will one day bring into being, 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. . .

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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