

"Being a Witness of Jesus Christ" - Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60

GRACE MERCY AND PEACE ARE YOURS FROM CHRIST: THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE!
Amen

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this Sunday we hear about the cost of being part of the Holy Christian Church. For being a follower of Christ we set ourselves up for rejection, mockery, loneliness, betrayal, and even death. This suffering and trials for Christ's sake is not new. For those believers in Jesus' time there is a progression of this rejection and persecution.

The Gospel of John chapter 9th, which was read on March 26, speaks about a blind man who received sight from Jesus. In that reading it said that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Christ was to be put out of the synagogue (vs.22). Now the reading of last Sunday Acts 2, we heard how the believers where together and had all things in common, and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. They were doing that because the believers were kicked out of the synagogue, and the widows and those who had need were cut off from resources and charity. So, the Church quickly, and with great enthusiasm and generosity, took action to provide for those now under Her care. On April 23, Easter 2, we also heard how Peter and some of the Apostles were beaten and charged not to preach Jesus as the Christ.

If you see, there is a progression; from being put out of the synagogue, to being cut off so that one could even starve, to being beaten all because one confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the long awaited Messiah, the promised Saviour. And, now we have today's reading from Acts chapter 6 which pulls all of that together.

Do not romanticise those early days of the Church, thinking that it would be wonderful to live in such a pristine time, as if it were almost the Garden of Eden itself. Recognize that the world hates Christ, the world hates those who believe in Christ, and the world will do whatever it take to silence the saving word of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ. And, also understand that the world hates you because of Jesus Christ.

But, here is the Easter joy, here is the promise of the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep, here is the powerful message throughout the Scriptures and specifically the Book of Revelation for all of the Church of all times, that you have been purchased and won by the holy and precious blood of Jesus, that you belong to Him, that no one can snatch you out of His hands, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That's it. That's the Good News of today and every day.

For life is getting dangerous. Life has always been dangerous for the Christian. It most certainly is now. Perhaps not here, yet. But, it most certainly is in many other parts of the world. Christian are persecuted in Iraq, Iran, Syria, China, Africa, etc. People are condemned to death because they convert to Christianity from Islam. Life is getting dangerous. But, before we get to that, let's get a little background, and let's look at what we are, and what we have in our life together as Christian people.

The Jerusalem church was confronted with some cultural tension, between the Greek and Hebrew Christians over the distribution of charity for those in need. So if the Jerusalem church could deal with internal struggle, so can we. For what binds us together is far greater than our cultural differences. We are one in Christ. We are people who have received and know the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Saviour, who died on the cross and rose again to win forgiveness for our sins and give us everlasting life.

This is far more important than anything that might divide us. It is the gospel of Christ, the common faith that we share, the gifts of God in which we all partake; Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Absolution, the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

We all share these gospel blessings in common, and that is what makes us a real community, a real fellowship. Our life together is bound together by the love of God in Christ. And so God gave the Jerusalem church the grace also to resolve the problem that arose. The apostles gather the church together, and they say, **“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”**

Here we see that there are two kinds of service in the church. There is the service of **“serving tables,”** that is, administering the distribution of food to the widows. And there is the ministry of **“preaching the word of God.”** Both are important, both are needed. It’s just a question of who does what. The pastors are called to devote themselves **“to prayer and to the ministry of the word,”** and they cannot be sidetracked from that. But, the widows cannot be neglected either.

So the congregation are encourage to select some wise and spiritual men to take care of that important service of mercy. And so that is what they do. Here the church’s life together, their fellowship, leads them to be able to overcome their struggles and attend the need of others as they service one another. And so our man Stephen was appointed to this offices of help and assistance in the life of the church. It’s not the pastoral ministry yet, it is service nonetheless.

Now, life is going to get dangerous. For, then it came about that Stephen, **“a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,” “full of grace and power”**, had occasion to bear witness, bold witness, to the truth of God. It came in the face of bitter opposition, anger, hostility, even murderous rage. The type of Jewish religious leaders who came against Jesus and had Him put to death now come against Stephen. And, it happens with many striking parallels, an unjust trial, false witnesses, whipping up a mob mentality, and the like. And yet, there have always been this type of people, those who hate Christ, those who hate believers in Christ, and those who will do whatever it take to silence the saving word of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ. But Stephen does not shrink back in fear. Rather, he speaks up with courage and power and great grace from God. Stephen boldly confessed Jesus to be the Christ. He bore witness to the saving Christian faith.

We do not have all of chapter 7 in our reading today, but to fill in the blanks, Stephen’s speech is powerful and bold. He reviews the history of Israel for these hostile Jewish leaders. He shows them that they are just like their fathers, the wayward Israelites of old who had opposed God’s prophets and rejected God’s word: **“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.”**

And you may be thinking, well, no wonder the people are angry. This is not exactly politically correct, feel good, friendly, loving you into the church kind of talk. But then, the true witnesses to the faith never sugar coat the truth of the magnitude of our sin nor the great promise and desire of God to save us in Christ. So, Stephen, the faithful witness, the faithful martyr, spoke what needed to be said. He needed to bear witness, and in this case, to bear witness against these stiff-necked people who were rejecting God.

Faithful witness is not always easy, people are not always going to like what you have to say, they are going to get mad, and yet, the word of truth needs to be spoken truthfully. And that is what Stephen did and because of that he died. The outraged enemies of God pick up stones and stone God’s witness to death. Stephen becomes the first Christian to die for the faith, and so we call him the first martyr.

Like Stephen, you too can be a martyr for our Lord, that is, you can be a faithful witness, whether or not you suffer death for it. God is watching over you. He is shepherding you along the way to get you to heaven. And, no matter how it should go, He will take care of you, even if you should die. Just be faithful. Don’t be afraid to speak.

God will give you courage and the words to say. Witness, mercy, life together in the fellowship of the Church; these things came together in the life of the early church, as we see in the case of Stephen. And, they come together in the life of the church today too. The early Christians were devoted to the fellowship. That's more than what happens when we have coffee after service. In the Bible fellowship is when we have an oneness with others because of Jesus. We all receive the same gifts, like forgiveness, peace, God's love, fortitude for living, and eternal life. When we are devoted to these things, we are in fellowship with one another.

Our God is the same God as He was back then, rich in grace, strengthening and sustaining His Church in Her calling as His people, the sheep of His fold. The God who makes us one and orders our life together as a community, as a fellowship of believers . . . the God who moves us to lives of compassionate service, showing mercy to those in need . . . the God who opens our mouths to speak His word, no matter the cost . . . the same God is with us today. By God's grace we hold on to the Easter joy, the promise of the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep, the powerful message throughout the Scriptures and specifically the Book of Revelation for all of the Church of all times, that you have been purchased and won by the holy and precious blood of Jesus, that you belong to Him, that no one can snatch you out of His hands, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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