

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER [B]

Acts 4:5-12

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! ***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

“No good deed goes unpunished.” That aphorism might well be the title for our First Reading today. In the name of Jesus, Peter and John have just healed a man who was lame, and they have been proclaiming the good news of the resurrection of Christ. And as a result of their ***kind*** and ***good*** works, they find themselves ***prisoners*** at the hands of the Jewish authorities.

The high priest and his cohort are annoyed and upset, because thousands have been turning to belief in Jesus. Peter and John and the other apostles are upsetting the established order. Perhaps what is especially galling is that these men are ***uneducated*** and ***common***. It surely was then as it is today — that intellectual and cultural elites do not take kindly to upstarts — who presume to change things, or to question their wisdom and authority.

So Peter and John have to answer for their actions and words, to an intimidating gathering of religious and civil authorities. Of course, Jesus had told his disciples that such a time of testing would come. In the twelfth chapter of St. Luke, Jesus declares:

*When they bring you before the synagogues
and the rulers and the authorities,
do not be anxious how or what you are to answer
or what you are to say;
for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour
what you ought to say. (vv.11-12)*

And so it is that Peter, “*filled with the Holy Spirit*” answers this intimidating gathering of leaders with ***boldness***. Peter declares forthrightly that the man was healed “*by the **name of Jesus Christ**...whom **you crucified**, whom **God raised from the dead**” (v.10). That in itself was surely scandalous.*

And then Peter goes on. He declares,
*This is the stone that was rejected by you builders,
but which has become the cornerstone.
And there is salvation **in no one else**,
for there is **no other name** under heaven given among men
by which we must be saved. (vv.11-12)*

If Peter’s first declaration was a scandal to the religious leaders of ***his*** day, it is his second assertion which seems especially scandalous ***today***:

There is salvation in no one else.

There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

The truth is, many Christians are embarrassed by this claim. Many Christians feel intimidated by a culture that strongly and even forcibly teaches that “you have *your* truth, and I have *my* truth,” and “all truths are equal. So, who are you to claim that *you* have the truth and others do not?” That is indeed an intimidating question.

But in reality, the Church does *not* claim to “*have*” the truth. We Christians do *not* claim to “*have*” the truth. No. But we *believe* and we *confess* that we have been *grasped by the TRUTH* — that we have been grasped by *Jesus Christ* — the one who is the *Truth Incarnate*. The Christian confession is that we have been encountered by the Truth revealed by God in Jesus Christ. And by God’s grace — through the working of the Holy Spirit — we have responded to that encounter in faith. And now part of our baptismal vocation is to witness to the Truth — to hope, and to pray, and to work, for *everyone* to be so encountered and to so respond — in faith.

Because what we have been blessed *to receive* from God, we are obliged *to share* with our neighbors. Others have a right to it — others have a right to *the Truth*, to Jesus — even if they don’t know that. Our neighbors too have a right to know Christ. And so Jesus teaches that God “*so loved* — not just you and me, but — *the world*.” And so Jesus commissions his followers to “*go and make disciples* — not just of some, but — *of all nations*.” Others have a right to know Jesus Christ, so that they might have an opportunity to believe, to trust in him. Ignorance of the Truth is not bliss. Ignorance is just ignorance.

Certainly what others have a right to know, they also have a *need* to know, if in fact it is the truth about their lives. To *spare* other people the experience of life with Christ, to *spare* others the opportunity of life in communion with the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — that is *not* a course of love or respect. That is rather, a kind of *contempt*. Indeed, it is its own kind of *arrogance* — deciding beforehand that others really do not need life with Christ.

But if the Gospel of Jesus Christ *is true*, then it is *not* simply “true for me”. No. The Gospel is true *for all*, or it is *not* true *at all*. Christians have to bite the bullet here, and dare to go against the cultural grain.

In our culture, the one truth which is imposed upon almost everybody, is that you must never impose your truth on others. This rule is so powerfully *imposed* by our culture, that it makes many Christians nervous about the whole idea of evangelism — of witnessing to, and sharing, the *good news* of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I have had a couple of opportunities to be a part of an organized visit to a mosque. On both occasions it was a good and positive experience, and it was educational and enriching to meet with Muslims, and to hear them speak about their religion. From my own reading, and from my visits with them, I know that Islam teaches that it is the truth for **all** people. And Muslims believe they are to spread the truth of their religion to everyone, and so to bring Islam to the entire world.

Now in my visits with them, their testimony certainly didn't convince me to become a Muslim. But neither was I threatened by it, nor was I offended by it. They believe Islam is **the** truth. They certainly don't believe that all ways lead to God — indeed such a notion is offensive to them. They believe Islam is the way. And they want to share their religion with others, and they are not ashamed to say so.

Even so, we Christians should take the Lord Jesus at his word. He declares: “I am **the way**, and **the truth**, and **the life**. No one comes to the Father but by me” (Jn 14:6).

Now, believing that there is salvation **only** in Christ should **not** make us arrogant or rude. **But** it should make us **passionate** to **share** this **good news!** We have wonderful news of forgiveness! We have incredible news of victory over sin, death and the devil. We have great good news of resurrection and life beyond the grave!

Nowhere do I see Christ or the apostles calling on us to denounce others, or to presume to judge them. Our call is to **share Christ** — to share him **proudly** and **boldly** — like Peter in our First Reading. And then to leave the fruit of our witness to the Holy Spirit. And leave the judgement to God.

The Orthodox lay theologian, Frederica Mathewes Green expresses the Christian call to witness in this way, she writes:

*Our current culture mistrusts religious fervor;
we think it means danger to those following other paths...*

*No matter what the teaching, followers of nearly every faith
have been persecutors...
and followers of nearly every faith have been victims.
But this is not inevitable...*

*Most “religious wars” through history
are actually wars over property or power,
with religion as an excuse. . .*

*In my neighborhood,
people of all faiths live side by side [peacefully],
and no one invokes the Deity
to forcibly seize his neighbor's shrubbery.*

*It is possible to believe strongly that smoking tobacco is wrong,
without rounding up and executing smokers.*

*It is possible to believe that one's faith is the most right one,
and that others must logically fall short in comparison,
while intending **no ill** to those who follow other faiths.*

*In fact, **intending them good**,
you might wish that they would look into your faith
and perhaps be persuaded to join you.*

— *At the Corner of East and Now*, pp.190-191

As we know from today's First Reading, we are not the first Christians to face difficulty when called on to bear witness to Jesus. We are not the first to face a society of many and various competing religions and truth claims. To a greater or lesser extent, the Church has always faced such situations. So in our own time and in our own place, let us pray that as he did for Peter and John, God may send us his Holy Spirit, and so teach us **what** we are to **say**, and **what** we are to **do**. And may we always **faithfully** and **boldly proclaim**:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.