

All Aboard

In the name of him to whom has been made subject all angels, authorities, and powers, dear friends in Christ: Throughout this Easter season the Epistle lessons we've been hearing and upon which I've been doing most of my preaching have come from St. Peter's first letter to the church at large. He opened his letter by extolling the amazing hope that we have in Christ: that because Jesus suffered and died for the sins of the world and then rose again for our justification, sin and death no longer have any lasting power over us. Because Jesus rose, we too will rise and will live forever with him in his perfect new creation.

From that wondrous foundation, we've since heard the Apostle laying out the implications of how this hope plays out in the believer's life in holiness of living, Christian love, and Christ-like behavior. These are very positive results of faith in Christ. But then a few weeks back we heard Peter tell of what might at first be considered a down side to believing. He said that because Christ suffered unjustly, the Christian too will at times be called upon to suffer unjustly. But he also said we should not view this as something bad; rather that it's a blessed thing by which the Lord instills other Christian virtues like patience, endurance, and the grace to forgive others.

In today's installment, Peter takes it a step further. We hear him telling us that not only may you be called upon to suffer unjustly, you can also expect to be slandered and attacked for doing good. It's like the old saying goes: no good deed goes unpunished. We had an example of this last week in St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Recall that it was specifically his record of doing good works in support of the church's mission that provoked the anger and resentment of his enemies. This in turn led to false charges being trumped up against him and ultimately to his being stoned to death. Yet even in his dying breath he continued to do good by praying that the Lord would not hold his murder against those who were killing him.

In the section immediately before today's text, Peter instructs us not to repay evil for evil or angry words and accusations for the same. Then, by way of another example, he quotes from a psalm of David which he wrote while he was on the lam. Though he had done nothing wrong, indeed, he had become a very successful commander in Israel's army who masterminded a number of highly effective campaigns against the enemy, King Saul, who was envious of David's success and jealous of his popularity with the people, declared him a criminal and put a price on his head. With his army he pursued David relentlessly hoping to kill him. Yet twice when David could have easily put an end to it by killing Saul, he didn't. Despite Saul's irrational hatred and murderous intent directed against him, David showed him kindness and entrusted himself to the Lord who judges justly. David understood that it's the Lord's job to dole out justice, not ours.

And David's kindness to Saul had another effect. It shamed Saul. It's hard to continue to be bent on destroying someone who insists on being nice to you even after all the horrible things you've done to them. Oh, don't get me wrong: evil is evil, and there's a cruel streak in all of us. It's very possible that someone may take your kindness and forgiveness as an open opportunity to continue their attack. But deep down inside everyone has a conscience – some deeper than others, to be sure. And it's in the conscience that the still small voice of God's Law accuses sinners and shows them what they are. And that is the first step toward conversion and faith in Christ.

That's why Peter moves on to the second step of conversion. He says, "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." Peter anticipates that kindness shown in the face of hostility will make people ask questions. "I don't get. I'm being mean to you; why do you still insist on being nice to me." Or maybe it's noticed by others who can't figure out why you continue to do good to someone who does you wrong. Your behavior is different. It stands out from the normal way of the world. People will want to know why.

So when they ask, you tell them. "I am different. I've been reborn a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ my Savior. He's God's Son who suffered and died for my sins and then rose from the dead. He's given me his Spirit. He's given me eternal life. And now I live for him." It's not difficult to articulate the basic truths of the Gospel, and every Christian ought to be able to do it. If nothing else, all you have to do is remember what's in the Apostles' Creed. That gives a simple outline of the entire faith. In my time I've seen all kinds of evangelism methods and campaigns come and go. In my view they are entirely unnecessary. Simplest is best. What's most effective is being a living witness by your actions, and then explaining the reason for your hope to those who ask. It also helps to invite them to join you for worship.

Of course, this presupposes that you're living in a way that causes people to ask – something I'm sure we could all do a better job of. But make no mistake; this kind of witness is extremely powerful. When Peter wrote his letter, the really big state sponsored persecution of the church was just getting underway. The enemies of Christians were saying all kinds of horrible things about them. Because they refused to worship the emperor, they were called atheists, which was considered a serious offense in those days. Because Christians referred to each other as brothers and sisters, they were accused of practicing incest. Because they were known to gather in private and consume "body and blood", they were accused of cannibalism. There were all kinds of other false charges hurled at them. And so it happened that when a fire broke out in Rome that destroyed a large portion of the city, a fire that was rumored to have been set by the emperor himself because he wanted part of the area cleared for some palaces he wanted built, the emperor cleverly shifted the suspicion from himself by accusing the Christians of being responsible. Now the people of Rome had a group they could truly hate and take vengeance on: those degenerate, god-hating, cannibalistic Christians.

They flocked to see the horrible tortures the emperor designed for Christians that he put on public display in the Circus Maximus, the great chariot racing arena in Rome. People ripped apart by four horses tied to their limbs, people sewed up in the bloody skins of sheep or goats and then fed to lions or packs of wild dogs, people slowly roasted over fires, all kinds of other sick, twisted torments, and of course, crucifixions; lots of crucifixions. And when the "entertainments" went on into the night, the crucified bodies were coated in pitch and tar and set ablaze to serve as lights for the arena so the spectacle could go on.

Such persecutions continued on and off again for the first two hundred years of the Christian era. But do you know what stopped them more than anything? It was the persecutions themselves. Many of the spectators couldn't reconcile what they were being told about Christians with the way they behaved when facing torture and death. They were passive, allowing themselves to suffer so. When mocked and cursed, they blessed. They faced death without fear. This had two effects. First it made people feel guilty about their bloodlust for Christians. A large number stopped attending the spectacles. Second, it made people wonder why, why did the Christians face death the way they did. When they asked, they got answers. They were told about Jesus. Many came to repentance and faith. The persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire stopped largely because the persecutions were the catalyst that caused most of the people to become Christians.

In our time and in our nation we Christians are not facing persecution as are so many of our brothers and sisters in the faith in other parts of the world. We hope and pray that their witness in trial will have the same effect on those who are persecuting them. But even here, we have our detractors. Because we believe in things like God and the afterlife, those who consider themselves full of scientific knowledge denounce us as superstitions fools. Because we believe that abortion is the murder of a human being, we are accused of trying to deprive women of the right to choose, thus, obviously, we hate women. Because we believe that life is sacred from its beginning to its natural end and so reject euthanasia and doctor assisted suicide, we are accused of wanting sick people to suffer. Because we uphold the values of traditional marriage as a lifelong union of one man and one woman – the way God designed it – we are accused of hating, well, pretty much everyone who endorses a lifestyle other than the one God designed.

People have all sorts of other reasons to hate Christians; some of them, sadly, are legitimate reasons. When Christians, especially Christians in positions of authority in the Church, don't act like Christians, it gives all of us a bad name. But that is the point. We have been called to witness Christ to the world just as Noah in his day gave witness to the true faith by building the ark. Peter elsewhere calls Noah a preacher of righteousness; that is, he confessed his faith to those who asked. And I'm sure he had plenty of people asking, "Hey Noah, what's up with the big boat?" His actions led to their questions.

And so also our actions are to lead unbelievers to ask questions because the Lord is even now in the process of building another ark. It's his holy Church: those who are united to Christ in faith and trust, those who have been washed in the water of Baptism and made heirs of the kingdom, those who live in hope of the life and world to come. In the flood only eight souls were saved. The Holy Christian Church is a much bigger boat. There's room for a lot more. Our goal is help get all people aboard because there's another flood coming, but this time around it will be a deluge of fire not water.

Jesus said they will know you are my disciples by your love. Thus our love ought to be on display at all times, for each other, yes, but even more for those who oppose us. Therefore we must not return insult for insult or evil for evil, but rather blessings for curses and good for evil – just as Christ our Lord did whose name we bear. Such actions will lead to the questions that will help people get aboard the ark of God's grace in Christ Jesus. Let's try to get them all aboard. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!