

Confessing Christ

In the name of our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us, dear friends in Christ: A few weeks back we had as our Gospel reading the story of the disciple who is widely known as “doubting Thomas”. He wasn’t present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples, and told the others that unless he could actually handle the wounds in the hands and side of the Lord’s living body he would refuse to believe that he had risen from the dead. Eight days later Jesus appeared to them again, and this time Thomas was present. Then, standing in the presence of Jesus, and surrounded by his already believing friends in the relative safety of a locked, private room in which no unbelievers or enemies were present, Thomas made his confession of faith in Christ when he declared: “My Lord, and my God.”

In *today’s* first reading, it’s Peter who is confessing his faith in Christ; but the circumstances are quite a bit different. He’s just spent the night in a different kind of locked room: a prison cell. He was thrown into it along with the disciple John because they had been caught talking to a large crowd on one of the temple courts about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. That made the Sadducees extremely angry. They were the dominant political and religious party among the priests and rulers of the Jewish people. It’s best to think of them as the theological liberals of their day in that they tended to be worldly minded and didn’t take the Scriptures very literally. To a certain extent they mixed their theology with Greek philosophy. The upshot was that one thing they rejected out of hand was the biblical teaching of the resurrection of the dead. They didn’t believe that anyone would ever rise from the grave. To them the afterlife could only be a spiritual thing, if indeed there even was an afterlife, which most of them denied. Oh, and Sadducees made up about eighty percent of the Sanhedrin, which was the seventy member ruling council of the Jews – the same ruling council that under Caiaphas, the high priest (also a Sadducee), condemned Jesus and pressured Pontius Pilate into crucifying him. So when they heard Peter and John talking about Jesus (didn’t we get rid of that guy?) and saying he had risen from the dead (blatant heresy!), well, they considered that two strikes against them. They had the disciples arrested on the spot.

But it was late in the day and there wasn’t any time to deal with them. So now, early the next morning, having spent an uncomfortable night in a dark, stinking cell wondering what might happen to them, Peter and John are forced to stand trial before the same assembly of corrupt, Christ-hating officials that gleefully and illegally condemned Jesus to death. To say that the court leans heavily against them would be a monumental understatement. To imagine that they might get anything resembling a fair hearing would be pure fantasy. And mind you, it’s only been about three months since Jesus was crucified. The memory of what happened to him – what he suffered at the hands of these men – is very fresh in the disciples’ minds. There’s no question but that the same thing or something very similar might happen to them before this day is over. And for Peter, at least, the memory of how easy it was to escape any kind of trouble simply by denying that he knew Jesus is there. Surely that temptation is calling to him again. As he faces the angry men before him, he could say it was all a mistake. He could take back what he said – claim he didn’t mean it or that he changed his mind; that he was sorry and would never say anything about Jesus or his resurrection again. Why, if he did that, they’d probably let him just walk away with nothing more than a stern warning.

But no, this day Peter will not tuck tail and run. On the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter had tried to stand in his own strength. It failed him. Doubt and fear overcame him, and he came to realize just how weak and pathetic he was. But things have changed since then. Now he understood what Christ’s death was all about: the sacrifice of the Lamb of God that takes away

the sin of the world – that took away *his* sin. Now he had seen the risen Lord Jesus; and more importantly, he received Jesus' words of peace and forgiveness. Peter had been restored. And on the day of Pentecost, he had received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit from on high, an outpouring that strengthened his faith and made him bold – willing to suffer whatever the enemy might throw at him – so that now he stood before the bitter enemies of Jesus and fearlessly confessed the truth about him. “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified—God raised him from the dead. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, 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.”

So, two confessions of faith in Christ, one by Thomas, the other by Peter; confessing the same truth but under vastly different circumstances. And now almost 2000 years later, we are the ones who are called upon to confess our faith in Christ. And like the disciples back then, we will do so under vastly different circumstances. We do it here assembled in the sanctuary of this church. And when we do, we are surrounded by like-minded family, friends, relatives, and fellow members – people we know, love, and trust – who are confessing the same faith in the living Savior. Here it's safe to confess Christ.

But we are also called to confess Christ before a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to Jesus and those who believe in him. Sure, there's always been opposition to the Christian message; but the truth is that majority of us grew up and lived most of our lives in an era in which it was easier to be a Christian. It was the accepted norm in our culture. It was taken for granted that most people held some version of faith in Jesus. That's no longer the case. And recently the enemies of the Church of Christ have grown more strident and aggressive in their vitriol directed against believers. Times have changed. And as time goes on we can only forecast that the enemies of the Church will become even more forceful and antagonistic.

But I don't want to sound like an alarmist. Some would-be prophets of our age seem to think that any day now the wholesale slaughter of Christians is going to suddenly begin in this country. I don't see anything like that happening in the foreseeable future. The chances of any one of us facing the kind of trial that Peter did – to be called upon to confess Christ knowing that it might get you tortured or killed – the odds of that are pretty low. It won't be like that for us—though I hasten to add that there are places in the world where things like that *are* happening, where Christians are suffering terribly and some are dying for their faith. So we can't remove the possibility altogether. It's a contingency we should be prepared for. But no, for the most part in our day and in our culture the attacks will be more subtle. There will be slow and steady pressure to renounce the faith or portions of it. There will be incentives to give in to compromise, to bend here and there. There will be ridicule and exclusion and prejudice – all designed to destroy the faith of believers by attrition, by slowly wearing it away and killing faith one small step at a time.

I don't need to tell you that it happens all too often: that so many well-meaning and faithful of our youth stand before the altar of God on the day of their confirmations, and they proclaim their faith with sincerity. They make their promises fully intending to keep them, that they will suffer all, even death, rather than depart from their confession of faith in Jesus. We've all known people like that who then slip away. Be it from spiritual lethargy, the cares and concerns day to day of life, the temptations and influence of the world, the deceptions of the devil, or some combination of them, the result is the same: They end up falling from the faith, effectively denying the Lord who bought them with his holy, precious blood. Like lambs who wander too far from their shepherd, they become easy prey for the wolves.

So the question is: how do we prevent that from happening? How do we ensure that the relatively safe confession of Christ made at Confirmation remains the confession of a lifetime, and that it is strong enough to endure both the fiery trials that are possible and the slow attrition that is certain?

It begins by recognizing just how needy and weak we are. When Peter tried to stand on his own, he fell. Though he swore up and down that he would never leave Jesus or forsake him, he ran like a coward at the first sign of trouble, and when threatened by the accusation of a little servant girl, he swore that he'd never known Jesus. The same is true of us. Weakened as we are by our sin, there's no way any of us can remain faithful by our own powers or abilities. That's the mistake so many people make. They get to a certain point in their spiritual development and imagine, "I can take it from here. I don't need any more." But the moment you stop feeding your spirit, it begins to starve.

So we begin by recognizing that we can't go it alone. There's a reason Jesus calls us sheep and himself the Shepherd. We're not going to make it without him. If you'll allow me to mix the metaphor, sheep on their own are sitting ducks. They are easy prey for the enemy. We need to be in constant contact and conversation with the Shepherd. We need to be under the protection of his rod and staff.

To do that, we have to know where to find him, where we come into contact with him; that is, in his Word and Sacraments. Jesus is not just some esoteric idea that we carry in our minds, nor is he a warm fuzzy feeling we have in our hearts. No, Jesus comes to us concretely and meets with us in discernible space and time so that we can hear his voice and actually know him. He is the very Word of God. He enters our ears when we hear the Word spoken. And he enters our mouths when we receive the body and blood of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. It's the faith we strengthen and feed here by his Word and Spirit, where we confess together the faith in relative safety, that gives us the boldness and courage to confess it out there in the world where it's not so safe.

And it's important that we do confess our faith out there in the world for two reasons. First, for our own sakes. Jesus said "Who confesses me before men, I will confess before my Father in heaven. But who denies me before men, I will deny before my Father in heaven." To fail to confess Christ is a losing proposition. Let's not make that mistake. But there's another reason to confess our faith before the world at large: Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." The heart of Jesus reaches out to a lost and loveless world where people are dying in ignorance of the Good Shepherd and how he gave his life to save us. And we, filled with his love, are compelled by his love to help gather those sheep of his that are, as yet, lost and without hope. We do that by giving the reason for the hope that lies within us. We do that by confessing the faith so that others may hear the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking through us.

Let us therefore do that like Thomas, like Peter, like countless other faithful men and women who have gone before us. Let us do so boldly and without fear, confident that our Good Shepherd is with us to feed, guide, and protect us, and that by confessing his name, he will ensure that we come to live with him and all the saints in the house of the Lord forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!