

7th Sunday after Easter May 21, 2023 Year A

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus is once again with the disciples. It's very near the time for him to return to the Father. The disciples do not know he will be leaving them. They expect their lives to continue as they were before Jesus was crucified. This is why they ask him if now is the time that he will restore the kingdom of Israel. It was supposed to be next on the Messianic agenda.

What does Jesus answer? He tells them that it's not their business to know that. The Father has his own timetable. Instead, Jesus tells them they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samarian and to the ends of the earth. They will have the power to do this when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

Then a cloud takes him out of their sight. When this happens, they remind me of tourists in New York City. You know the kind: in a clump, in the middle of the sidewalk, staring upward and taking pictures. Then two men in white tell them that Jesus will return so there is no need to capture a last look.

If Jesus meant something different than a political kingdom, what did he mean? I think that the Lord's Prayer is the key here. We pray first for God's kingdom to come. The second petition is for God's will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Barclay explains "that by the Kingdom Jesus meant a society upon earth where God's will would be done as perfectly as in Heaven. Because of that, it would be a kingdom founded on Love not on power".

How are the disciples to become witnesses to that kind of kingdom? They will be empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will remind of everything Jesus told them. His resurrected life, which they have experienced, is compelling enough to spread the good news to the far reaches of the earth. Besides this their witness will consist of the way they live as a result of knowing Jesus. There will be witness not only in words but in deeds.

The world around us needs our witness to this alternative kingdom. We have an opportunity to become a community of compassion and acceptance: where people can find Jesus. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to empower us as witnesses to a kingdom based on love.

To many modern Christians, especially in America and Europe, this letter from St. Peter to gentile believers undergoing persecution must seem strange, even irrelevant. We don't have our property confiscated by the state or face discovery and execution because we are Christians. But in many places in the world if you are not a member of the official religion or if you convert to another religion, you will face persecution. If you are a Muslim in a predominantly Hindu country or a Christian in a Muslim country, or a Muslim in a Buddhist country, or Jewish almost anywhere you will face persecution.

It even happens among different sects of Christians – witness Northern Ireland.

It is because the founders of this country were familiar with religious warfare that we have separation of church and state.

Why does this happen? The simple answer is fear. Fear of who is different turns into discomfort, suspicion and finally scapegoating. Does excluding or defaming a person because of their faith make you a better Christian? Of course not. It makes you a self-righteous person, hardly an advertisement for Jesus.

So what do we do? First of all, make a deeper commitment to your own faith. God is the one who has your well-being in mind: trust him. If we do this we will not feel threatened by another person's beliefs. Remember the Bible says perfect love casts out fear. Secondly, pray for those who are being persecuted. Pray that the Holy Spirit will protect them and help them in their trials to trust God and avoid bitterness and retaliation. Last but not least get to know people in others faiths so you can develop mutual respect.

Our gospel reading for today is from Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. He will turn a shameful death into the means of victory over death and sin. He does not address his disciples directly in his prayer. They are listening in on Jesus' intimate communion with his Father. He is not giving them instructions about what to do when he is no longer with them. He is entrusting them to God for the future of his church.

He looks up to Heaven and prays to his Father saying that the hour has come. He asks God to glorify him so that he may glorify God. The cross is the completion of the work that God has given him to do.

As the disciples listen in, Jesus says that God has given him authority to give eternal life to those whom God has given to him. What is eternal life? Is it simply an extension of life as we know it? No. It is different in quality not just in length. Jesus says that eternal life is the only true God and Jesus, the one whom God has sent. It's a question of relationship with God, not just intellectual knowledge. This is why Jesus came here – to reveal the nature and love of God to those the Father sent to him.

Lastly, Jesus entrusts his disciples and their future to God. One might ask where Jesus gets this optimism about the future. Could he have trusted this rag tag bunch to their own devices? No. God gave him eleven very ordinary people to carry his message to the world. Instead, he asks God to protect them in his name. He asks that they become one with the same intimacy that he has with his father...that they may be one as we are one.

Our future is in God's hands. He uses ordinary people like us to continue Jesus' work on earth. We are in good hands.