

My friends, during these serious and troubled times, people of all faiths should remember the following great religious truths:

- Muslims do not recognize Jews as God's Chosen People.
- Jews do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah.
- Protestants do not recognize the Pope as the leader of the Christian world.
- Baptists do not recognize each other at the liquor store.

This final religious truth could perhaps be considered representative of those of us who are relative neophytes in the exercise of the priestly function of preaching or sermonizing. There are certain Sundays in the liturgical church year that lack strong theological themes; this is one of those Sundays that are well known to such as us. Other such Sundays include the First Sunday After Easter (Low Attendance Sunday), the Sunday next before Advent (Last Minute Shopping Sunday), the First Sunday After Christmas (Christmas Letdown Sunday), and the Circumcision of Christ on January 1 (Hangover Sunday). These are the Sundays where we bring to our congregations the assembled wisdoms and great truths as we tend to understand them – practical, down-to-earth, easy to comprehend. I am reminded of the Sunday school teacher who was telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan. She asked the class, "If you saw a person lying on the roadside, all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?" To which a thoughtful little girl replied in a hushed voice, "I think I would throw up." Yes, my friends, this is one of those Sundays where us underlings preach the reality of the Word because our superiors are convinced that we can't possibly screw it up with our down-to-earth approach.

So having forewarned you of the pragmatic approach I intend to take, let me attempt to put the significance of this Sunday in a little more appropriate and serious format. The Propers for this Sunday after Ascension Day are intended to prepare us for the festival we will celebrate next Sunday, that of Whitsunday or Pentecost. Whitsunday celebrates the gift to the Church of the Holy Ghost, as evidenced by his initial visitation to the 11 Apostles. This Sunday is aptly named by its ancient Latin name of *Dominica Expectationis*, or Waiting Sunday, a reference to our humble waiting for our comforter and strengthener, promised and sent by the Lord Jesus to his church from God the Father.

In the Collect, we celebrate the Exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father in heaven, and then make petition for the gift of the Holy Ghost through whose presence and power, we, the people of God on earth, will be able to ascend to be with Christ in heaven. In the Epistle from I St. Peter, we are taught how to behave and be faithful in Christ's absence until his coming again. The Gospel tells us the how, why, and what to expect as we set about Christ's charge to go spread the kingdom of God. This is the passage, coming from St. John, chapters 15 and 16, which I would like to deal with in more detail.

The setting for this exchange is a meeting between Jesus and his disciples prior to His crucifixion. Jesus is trying to console His followers regarding His ultimate departure from earth, and to show them how He will care for them after He is gone. In the initial sentences, Jesus speaks of the Holy Ghost and his identity. He speaks of Him as a Person, He is “the Comforter” who is to come; One whom He “will send from the Father”; one whose office it will be to “testify”. These are not words that imply a mere influence or inward feeling, as one might associate with the concept of a spirit. They speak of a Being who is to be adored as the third Person in the blessed Trinity. We see that there is a close and intimate connection established between the Spirit, the Father, and the Son, and that all three Persons comprising the Trinity operate in concert and unity with each other.

The Lord then speaks of the special office of the Apostles, and what that office will be expected to accomplish. They are to be His witnesses in the world. They are to bear testimony to facts which many will not want to believe, and to truths which many will dislike. They are to stand alone, a few against many, a little flock preaching to a great multitude. To witness is their duty, whether men believe what they say, or not.

He then delivers a remarkable prophecy regarding the environment in which these efforts will take place. He tells His disciples that they will be cast out of the Jewish Church, and persecuted even unto death. Far from receiving the Apostles and their message with gratitude, the world will hate them, spitefully use them, and ultimately put all but one of them to a martyr's death. Their persecutors will actually persuade themselves that it is right to do so in the sacred name of God.

And how true the prediction about persecution and trouble, like every other prophecy of Scripture, has turned out to be. The Acts of the Apostles show how the unbelieving Jews persecuted the early Christians. Then in Europe, Christians turned upon other Christians during the Popish Inquisitions. In England, the holy Reformers Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer were burned at the stake for their religion by men who professed to do all they did from zeal for pure Christianity. And persecution continues even in our own day; one has only to turn to Africa or the Middle East to see current Christian persecution in a massive way. As Pope Francis said just a few days ago, there are more Christian martyrs in our day and age than there have been throughout all recorded history.

To count the cost of our faith is one of the first duties that ought to be pressed upon us as Christians. It is no kindness to Christians of any age to paint the service of Christ in false colors, and to keep back from them the old truth, “Through much tribulation, we must enter the kingdom of God.” By prophesying smooth and easy journeys, and preaching “Peace” and “Love” and “Inclusiveness”, we may easily fill the ranks of Christ's army with professing soldiers. But these

are the same soldiers who in time of tribulation, may fall away and turn back to old ways. No Christian is in a proper state of mind who feels he or she can reinterpret Christian morality, or term Scripture as irrelevant, or ignore 2000 years of church history as not being pertinent to today's setting. Anyone that expects to easily cross the troubled waters of this world, and to reach heaven with wind and tide always in his or her favor, is potentially and seriously misinformed. Suffering is not something that people in this country like to think about. Yet while we can rarely tell what is before us in life, we must attempt to see the suffering in it as a temporary and brief preparation for eternal joy – as a means of growing in holiness as we acknowledge God's providence in gratitude and submission. Christ has made us certain of one thing: as His soldiers, we must carry the cross if we would wear the crown. Bearing our cross means suffering for our Savior, but not for our sins. This is a crucial point to remember on this Sunday as we wait for the arrival of the Comforter, who will help us bear our cross. We may have to suffer for our Lord, but we will not have to suffer for our sins.

As we contemplate this concept of suffering as soldiers of Christ, let me leave you with a final point to ponder. Tomorrow we will celebrate Memorial Day, that national day of remembrance of those who have given up their lives in the military service of our country. In the same two chapters of the Gospel of St. John that I mentioned earlier as the source of our Gospel lesson for today, there is found the following verse – specifically verse 13 of chapter 15: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”. There are many in high places in this country who would tell you that the United States is no longer a Christian nation, that it is no longer led by the Christian morals and commandments that were so evident in the early formative days of our nation. To them and their ilk I would offer the example of those that we shall remember tomorrow as current and ongoing examples of the fallaciousness of such statements. They and their families are the dying and living examples of those who understand that the exercise of rights also entails the exercise of responsibilities; that those who would live in this country must be prepared to suffer for it; that those who would wear the crown of peace, must also be prepared to carry the cross of war. May all of us never forget their sacrifices, and may those sacrifices serve to help redirect this nation into the path of righteousness that made it once so great. *Amen.*