

A Witness to Christ

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

April 18, 2021

Acts 3:12-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

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

“Would the witness please take the stand!” Those are familiar words to those of us who have watched courtroom dramas in the movies and on TV. The testimony of the witness can make all the difference to the outcome of a case.

When witnesses take the stand they have to swear on the Bible to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me God.” That’s a reminder that in life there is more than one witness - there is also God who is our witness in heaven. That’s something to think about, as you wait for Judgement Day.

We, as Christians, are witnesses too. The first witnesses were the disciples. Jesus tells them: “You are to be witnesses of these things.” They are witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. How did they witness? Unlike us, they didn’t have written gospels to preach from - instead, they relied upon three things: one, their own experiences. That gave their testimony a special power, because they spoke from what they knew. Two, they also had the Hebrew Bible, which foretold the coming of Jesus. And three, the decisive element in their testimony was the Holy Spirit, given to them to speak and act with confidence in proclaiming the gospel. In the power of the Spirit they went forth to preach the good news of Christ, cure the sick, and bring hope to those in fear and despair.

And what about us? We are inheritors of the story of salvation, and are now participants in it. The life and message of Jesus has been handed down to us as a living document - a sacred document - written into the hearts of men and women and proclaimed from age to age. As witnesses in the 21st century, we offer our own testimony about Jesus. We speak about the gentle and humble prophet who spoke the wisdom of God and healed the sick; who gave up his life so that we may have life everlasting. We speak of the words of Jesus, who in parables taught us about the kingdom of heaven. We speak of the one who washed the feet of his disciples, who taught by actions as much as by words. We speak of the one who trusted in his Father in heaven, and was obedient to him, even as far as to suffering death on the cross.

We speak of one who trusted in his disciples to carry on his good work. He trusted in those who denied him, doubted him, and abandoned him. He trusted in them because there was no one else. For all their failings, and imperfections, and shortcomings, and misunderstandings, and mistakes, and stumbles - for all that, somehow, miraculously, the word of God revealed in Jesus Christ went forth into the world and transformed the world. What made the difference was the courage of those first witnesses. For the sake of their Savior and for the sake of the gospel they ventured forth into an often hostile world to give their testimony. They told the truth and many paid the ultimate price. But they were willing to do so because they loved the gospel and they loved the man.

We are called to do the same, to take up the torch and carry the light of Christ into the world. We offer our testimony as ones whose lives have been changed by the man from Galilee. We are called to speak out of our own experience - I think that is the most effective way to be a witness. Some use the words of Scripture, which is fine, but you will discover that the most effective testimony is to talk about the way Jesus has transformed your own life.

Avoid the ways that can harm the message of the gospel. Be conscious of the impression you make on others. If you have a negative view of the Church, then people will wonder why you are a member. If you gossip and run down your neighbor to others, they may think that to be a Christian means to find fault with others. They may even think that God is like that.

Being a witness means to listen to others. When someone knows you are a Christian and trusts you with some personal revelation, you have a duty to listen lovingly and non-judgmentally. Sometimes our witness is simply to pray and be silent. Like, for example, at the bedside of one who is ill. Let your witness be in small gestures, like the holding of a hand, or in a loving smile.

In your prayer and witness, always speak the truth. If that means to admit to doubt, or to a weak faith, then so be it. Sometimes people are more encouraged by one whose faith is weak than by one whose faith is invincible. To be weak, after all, is simply to acknowledge our need for God.

Why all of this matters is revealed by Jesus in his words to the disciples - you know, the ones who denied, doubted and abandoned him. This is what Jesus says to them: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." At the heart of this message is the repentance and forgiveness of sins. Therein is the power of Jesus' message. It is the answer to the question, "what is love?" When we love God, we humble ourselves before him and repent of our sins. Because of God's love for us, our sins are forgiven and we are washed in the blood of the lamb.

The eternal message of love and salvation and forgiveness and joy needs new witnesses in every generation. God is calling you and you and you to be witnesses. Bring your faith to the foreground. God is here now, and God goes with you when you leave today. To a world of fear and uncertainty, bring the message of hope and love. Alleluia, Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

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

Father David Beresford