

“Father, Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do”

- I. Introduction: Martyr: An English word based upon the Greek *martys* and referring to one “who bears testimony” or “who gives witness.” The word martyr brings to mind the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34) and the words of Stephen in today’s lectionary from Acts (8:60), “Lord do not hold this sin against them.” Stephen was the first martyr of the young Christian church and the first in a long line of Christians who have been martyred for their faith since that time throughout all parts of our world. In fact, there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than in all of the first nineteen centuries of the church combined.

- II. Yet for many of us raised in the freedom of the western world, martyrdom seems like a foreign idea. I believe that part of my task this morning is to challenge the remote feel of martyrdom for us and to broaden the concept of witnessing and bearing testimony so that it feels closer to home and more possible. You see, Jesus told his followers, including you and me, that we must drink from the cup he drank from and that we must be willing to give up our lives in order to save them.

When I was the Associate Priest at St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church in Aiken, South Carolina, I was responsible for reviving what had become a defunct youth program. I had at my side a cadre of committed lay youth leaders, as we do here, who understood that unless our young people learn the stories of our faith they will have fewer and fewer of the stories to tell their children. You have heard me say that it takes only two generations for the Christian faith to die in a culture. One of the programmatic things we were doing was to have youth periodically lead Sunday morning worship services, including preaching. I worked with each young person as he or she prepared to preach.

In one service, Cam, a 16 year-old young man, preached. He included the following true story because it had touched him deeply. Shortly before the Sunday Cam was to preach, three young Christian African boys in Northern Nigeria were walking on a trail in the bush. It was a part of Nigeria where Muslims are in the majority and Christians were being actively persecuted. There were attempts underway to drive the

Christians out of that part of the country and to set up Sharia law. Let me be clear. I believe that the majority of Muslims throughout the world would not and do not engage in hostile actions towards Christians. However, while they were walking these three young boys were suddenly surrounded by a group of religious attackers who demanded that they renounce Christ. Two did and were allowed to flee, but one did not, even though he was threatened repeatedly. Finally the attackers drew their machetes and struck him repeatedly, each time demanding that he denounce Christ. Each time he refused. One of the other boys had hidden in the bush and watched this happen. Finally the young boy mercifully died. Soon after that attack this young man in South Carolina, who had lived a very comfortable life, preached as a witness to the death of another young Christ boy thousands of miles away in Nigeria.

Does being a martyr require one to die for Christ? No, not necessarily and not usually. But being a witness does require having the courage and commitment to “bear testimony” to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, as some of us know, bearing testimony does mean that a part of us must die, that we are asked to die to ourselves and be born anew in Christ. But we know that the witness does not set the terms of the contract; the witness is only asked to step forward when called upon to provide testimony. Such calls come in many forms. The day before yesterday I had my clericals on and bought an item in the store. The clerk gave me too much change. When I realized what had happened I called it to her attention and gave the excess change back. It would seem a small thing, but it would not have been a Christian witness if I had kept the extra change.

Two days ago two young Mormon missionaries came to our front door and asked to witness to me. I did not invite them in, but blessed them for their devotion to their faith. They asked me what I did, and I told them that I was an Episcopal priest. Next they asked me what Episcopalians believe and I shared with them that we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, that we believe in the Trinity, that God created us, that Jesus sustains us, and the Holy Spirit empowers us. And lastly, that the Great Commission commands us to share the Gospel with others.

I am not unique. I may often wear a black shirt and clerical collar, but no matter what we wear, our family and friends and neighbors know that we are Christians, that we go to church, and they watch us to see what difference that makes. They watch to see what we bear testimony to and to see what we witness to in our lives. God gives us opportunities to bear witness each day. Please don't miss these opportunities; please don't let your fears of possibly being seen as a “religious fanatics” prevent you from talking about and living out the presence of Jesus Christ in your life.

III. Conclusion. My yoke is easy. You know, I often think about Stephen, that most likely he was a gentle loving man because he was the first Deacon in the young Christian church. He had been picked to wait on tables and care for the poor in the church. And yet it was Stephen who suffered a martyr's death. I don't know why bad things happen to good people . . . someday I intend to ask God face to face to help me understand that. But I do know that God has promised to be with us and sustain us through any challenge we face.

I would like to end with a story that I have told here once before. Please forgive me for the repetition. A community of Christians was worshipping in a country where the government was hostile to Christianity and threatened Christians if they gathered together. One Sunday morning a group of Christians were worshipping when they heard the sound of army trucks screeching to a halt outside the church. A group of uniformed soldiers burst into the church with machine guns in hand. The commander yelled, "You know this gathering is illegal. This is your only chance: Leave now." Half of the congregation left and the other half remained faithfully seated. The troops then barred the doors, closed the windows, and the commander said, "Now we can worship with you because we know we can trust you. You are true believers."

Christ has told us, "You must drink the cup that I drink," but Christ has also told us, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Perhaps that's why gentle Stephen could say as he was dying, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." My brothers and sisters in Christ, tell the story to your children and your children's children, bear testimony to the resurrected Christ and bear witness to the light. Alleluia.

Amen.