

Sermon for the Easter 7 – John 15:26-16:4
In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Jesus told His disciples in today's Gospel, "Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." And that hour of killing did come for almost all of the twelve. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells of James the Greater who was put to death by the sword under Herod the King. Christian tradition tells us of the deaths of Bartholomew and James the Lesser. Bartholomew, also numbered among the twelve, was flayed alive and beheaded for bringing the Gospel to pagan Armenia. While preaching Christ crucified in Jerusalem, James the Lesser was pummeled with stones, after which he was taken to the roof of the temple and pushed off, falling to the ground. Laying there half dead with both legs broken, James prayed for his murderers before being bashed over the head with a club and giving up his soul to God. The early Christian St. Stephen, met death in a similar way in Acts chapter 7. John the Evangelist did not die a martyr's death, but his lifetime of suffering persecutions and being exiled could rightly label him as a white martyr, as distinguished from the red martyrs who shed their blood. The Resurrected Christ tells St. Peter near the end of John's Gospel, "'... [W]hen you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' (This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God)." The legend says that St. Peter was crucified upside down.

In the Greco-Roman world, a man's life was defined by the manner in which he died. A peaceful and dignified departure from this world was a much coveted end. But being beaten, crucified or beheaded lacked all dignity. According to their deaths, all these men looked like failures. It would seem that when they died, so did everything they believed. But their voices continued to be heard, as future generations would hold to the Chief Cornerstone whom they preached and whom they confessed.

However, there was a temptation back in the days of the early church. One that we know St. Peter succumbed to at a time. It was the temptation to deny Christ, that is, to deny the truth. There was an allure to take the easy road and avoid suffering. Do we also take the easy road to avoid suffering? Have we also denied the faith out of indifference or cowardice? Do we take the "safe way" and hide our confession of the true faith from co-workers, relatives, friends, or those who believe differently? Do we avoid those tough conversations so that we can be loved, so that we can be accepted, so that we can be successful in the world? Do other people know us as a baptized and redeemed Christian? Have we been ashamed of our salvation?

Speaking the truth is uncomfortable and it has always been dangerous for Christians. But bearing the truth and bearing a cross always go together. A cross-less Christianity is really no Christianity at all. St. Peter warns the faithful, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though some strange thing were happening to you." We are in the world, but definitely not of the world. The world hates us because our religion is so vastly different from theirs. According to the world, when you do good things you get rewarded, and when you do evil you get punished. The kingdom of the left certainly has its place. But what about in the church? Liars, gossipers, and thieves come with penitent hearts and don't pay the eternal penalty of their sins. The guilty continue to live by the sacrifice of the innocent. In the eyes of the world, it's not fair. In fact, it's downright scandalous, because it seems there is no justice in this kingdom. The world hates this gracious mercy and it will hate us who live in it. On our sojourn in this world, St. Peter bids us to not think these trials strange. It always hurts to leave the world behind. They never grant a peaceful release. They never quit their claim. They never cease in their seductions. They never stop offering

bribes. But "Rejoice!" Peter said. Rejoice that you partake in this trial, for in this way you participate in Christ's suffering. Wait with Christ for the joy of the glory to be revealed and the Spirit of glory and of God and of His Son to rest upon you. We go the way Christ has gone because we are His.

That is why Christ sent the Helper, because we need Help. He comes to Help. He comes to comfort. He comes to strengthen. He comes to Paraclete. He overshadowed us at the font. He stirred the waters. He brought order out of chaos and the Bride of Christ conceived a newborn child. This proceeding Spirit abides at our side and in our heart. He is our Intercessor. He is our Aid. He comforts with the healing balm of His Christ-revealing Words. But be warned. The trials still come. And He might rescue you out of the pit only to sell you to traveling Ishmaelites. He might bring you to Egypt only to place you into Potipher's wife's seductive trap. He might put you into prison with bakers and stewards who have fallen out of favor with the king. You might be mourned by those who love you. You might be forgotten as though you were never born. You might endure famine and betrayal, sorrow and shame. You might even lose your name. But the Lord will not leave you. He will not forget you.

Dearly Beloved, the Helper abides in us. We are His Temple. And He will work all things together for our good, good that we cannot even imagine or foretell, good beyond the reckoning expectations of mortal men, good as only He is good. He is even now guiding and rebuking, chastising and leading, giving counsel and aid, comforting in His Word, though in our childish ways we sometimes resist and ignore. Still, by Christ's Death and Resurrection He bestows the peace that passes all understanding. He leads us ever deeper into the Truth that Jesus Christ alone is the Way. That is how the Helper helps. That is how He gives us Divine strength for the fiery trials we must endure. He brings us to the Word, to the Body and the Blood, to our brothers and sisters in the Church. He glorifies the Father, speaking us clean again, in taking what is the Father's and giving it to us.

However, our trials still come. Perhaps we will be delivered from the flames in the manner of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the book of Daniel. The Lord rescued those holy three out of the furnace. Perhaps we'll not taste death like Enoch and Elijah, if our Lord should return soon. Perhaps so, but perhaps not. For the Lord does not deliver all His saints in the same way. He used swords, clubs, and crosses to bring home his disciples and to witness to His power in the world. He used wild beasts and flames to bring home His early church saints and to proclaim His triumph over death. Who knows what He will do with us? But no matter what, He will see us through. The Lord will not forget His promise or His Word. He is coming back. His Blood will still cause the angel of death to pass over. His Name still rests on us. Death cannot have us. Hell has lost its claim. One way or another, He will deliver us. He will glorify us.

So bring your broken hearts and weary souls, your fragile sensitivities and secret fears. Bring your desires and your wants, your wishes and your hopes. Christ will give you rest. He will give you a new song to sing. He will satisfy you. He will plant in you eternal hope. He will give you Himself, even as He does this day when He says: "Take and Eat. Take and Drink. Be united to Me and the Father and the Spirit. Bask and live in My Love." Thus says the Lord.

Behold, dearly beloved: the Holy Spirit comes. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠