

MAY 24, 2009  
EASTER 7  
“MARTYRS”

Let us pray: Gracious God, sanctify us in the truth, for your word is truth able even to make the likes of us “martyrs” — courageous witnesses who are able and willing to “testify” with our very lives to the good news of Jesus Christ that has laid hold of us. In the strong and gentle name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

Our first reading from the first chapter of Acts tells the peculiar story of how one of the first orders of the day following Jesus’ resurrection—even before the Day of Pentecost which we’ll celebrate next Sunday—was for the “disciples” of Jesus, meaning his original pre-resurrection followers—now called “apostles”—literally “sent out ones”—to select a twelfth member of their inner circle. Who can tell me why they needed to select a 12<sup>th</sup> apostle? (Pause)

Yes, that's right, to name a successor to Judas who had taken his own life following his betrayal of Jesus. Numbers are important in scripture and the number 12, reflected the 12 tribes of Israel which symbolized the whole of Israel in all its diversity. And so a first order of the day—even before there was a church as such—was to select a successor to Judas—a new 12<sup>th</sup> apostle.

Now this matter of how to fill the vacancy apparently created a void into which Peter, the leader of the disciples (and future pope!) quickly stepped in with this novel proposal. Remembering the impetuous Peter of Luke's Gospel, the ascended Jesus is no longer present to curb his enthusiasm or critique his idea. But as Acts 1 pictures the scene, Peter stands up among “the believers”—a group that Luke bothers to tell us numbers 120 persons—and declares “Friends”—although the Greek really says, “fellow **men**”—a sad sign that

Jesus' women followers already were being excluded from the decision-making process—in order to fulfill scripture we need to select a successor to Judas. And this, Peter says, is the criterion for selection: —and again the word is *andros* meaning “man” and not *anthropos* meaning “human being” —“*one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us (meaning the day of the ascension) —one of these must become a “witness with us to the resurrection.”* The word “witness” here is significant—being literally in Greek “martyros,” the word from which our English word “martyr” derives—a word we’ll encounter several times in our second reading. But here it’s clear that being a “martyros” or witness to Jesus’ resurrection was a prerequisite for being qualified as an apostle—a former follower of Jesus, a

disciple, now being an “apostle” or sent-out one, a “commissioned one,” we might say.

This really takes us back a bit further in Acts 1 where Jesus ascends into heaven with these words of promise for the 11: “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses—**martyroi**—martyrs—in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” To be

“martyrs—witnesses—to the resurrected One Jesus, you see, is the essential mission of the “sent-out” ones—the 11 now about to become 12 who will be empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when they in effect become “church”—*ecclesia* being a word that literally means “called out ones”—those “called out” to become “witnesses” to Jesus, God’s resurrected One.

So, the story goes, two men who fulfilled the criterion of having been followers of Jesus from the time of his baptism by John through the time of his

resurrection and ascension were proposed. Why two we don't know, but it certainly underlines the fact that Jesus' followers numbered many more than the original 12 and, of course, the Gospels confirm as much including the many women who followed Jesus. But two are proposed—one named Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus, and a second named Matthias. These two that we know nothing else about have provided grist for enterprising novelists that have speculated on the future careers of these otherwise unknown followers of Jesus.

But it's the means of selection that grabs our attention isn't it, a casting of lots—or a kind of lottery—a drawing of straws we might call it which seems peculiar doesn't it, the church being on record against gambling, and “the luck of the draw” as we say, not being normally associated with a choice made by God, except in those cases where we talk about something happening that seems “providential” rather than merely

“lucky.” But please notice that here both Justus and Matthias have been judged to fulfill the criterion needed for an apostle and then, Acts says, *“they prayed and said, ‘Lord you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the apostles.”*

Here, clearly, Jesus’ followers felt that God was making the real decision using them as instruments in the decision-making, a process we see repeated throughout Acts as the followers of Jesus face tough decisions along “The Way” of the infant church in, of course, what was a pre-democratic age. The pet phrase that will emerge from Acts is one the church sometimes still uses—or at least aspires to—*“It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit”*—an, of course, dangerous phrase if it’s taken to mean that the Holy

Spirit automatically endorses the church's decisions—in the manner of a “rubber stamp”, as we say. But at its best the phrase—along with today's story of prayer followed by the casting of lots to decide between two qualified candidates—illustrates the sense of God's using human instrumentalities and decision-making means to accomplish God's will, by the power of the Holy Spirit.. It is in this sense of “it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit” that we look forward to this August's ELCA Churchwide Assembly's decision regarding the full acceptance of glbt persons that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago on RIC Sunday. And it's in this sense that you as a congregation begin the process that will in time move toward a decision regarding the calling of your new pastor—aiming to reach a decision that “seems good to you and the Holy Spirit”—a decision that will result in a call that you will extend as a congregation but that you and your new pastor must also

consider as ultimately God’s call. And who knows, maybe you’ll end up flipping a coin or drawing straws though I hope not playing the California lottery in calling a pastor to join you in your mission to be witnesses, martyrs, to the Risen Jesus.

You know how the history of the early church under the Roman Empire prior to Constantine is full of stories of those who gave their lives rather than recant their faith in Jesus Christ, the stories of Polycarp and Justin, of Perpetua and Felicity, as well as Peter and Paul and several of the original apostles of Jesus—as well as nearer contemporaries like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Oscar Romero. The meaning of “martyr” over time has been sharpened to mean those who literally “give their life’s blood”—suffer death—on behalf of witnessing to the faith in the face of hostile forces.

But we need to recover the larger, more comprehensive meaning of “martyr” as

“witness” as well, as in the sense of today’s Gospel reading in which without using the word “martyros” Jesus nonetheless testifies to his concern for his followers that God “*protect them from the evil one*” as he is about to send them into the midst of a threatening world that will hate them because “*they do not belong to the world.*” These followers, Jesus prays to his Abba God, are those who “*have kept your word...for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you.*” “Truth” here stands for the “witness” or “testimony” — another meaning of *martyros* — entrusted by God through Jesus to his followers. Jesus concludes: “*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them*” — literally in Greek, “apostled” them — sent them out on a mission as apostles.

But to clinch my point about the “martyrdom” or “mission of being

witnesses” to the resurrected One as our Christian calling, we need only look briefly at our second reading for today from the First Letter of John. For here, in 5 short verses the word *martyr* or its cognates appears 7 times, though you can be excused for not recognizing it. For the word “martyr” is translated here as “testimony” and “testified.” Rhetorically we’re “bathed” in martyr language, a “testimony” that those who believe in the Son of God bear in their hearts. “*And this is the testimony*” I John says on his 7<sup>th</sup> and final use of the word. (I hear a kind of flourish of trumpets—ta dah!) “*God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*” This, in a nutshell, is the Gospel—the good news—the testimony or witness to which we are to be martyrs, even to the death when need be. This is our Easter calling, to be martyrs to the resurrected Jesus and that eternal quality of life he now embodies, God’s promised inheritance of life that death cannot hold.

Every once in a while I find myself drawn to a piece of ancient, post-biblical Christian literature that is itself an eloquent and compelling testimony to the martyr or witness of early Christians to the empire of their day. It's called "The Epistle of Diognetus" which scholars date to about the year 200 less than a hundred years perhaps after the last piece of NT scripture was written. Hear a bit of this reflection on the martyros of Christians amid the still pagan world of the Roman Empire: "*Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind by either country, speech, or customs.... While they dwell in both Greek and non-Greek cities, as each one's lot was cast, and conform to the customs of the country in dress, food, and mode of life in general, the whole tenor of their way of living stamps it as worthy of admiration and admittedly extraordinary.... Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land. They marry like all others and beget*

*children; but they do not expose their offspring (which you may know was a particularly loathsome practice of placing unwanted babies—often girls—on the mountainside to die of cold or wild animals). Their board they spread for all but not their bed. They find themselves in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth but hold citizenship in heaven. They love all men, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown yet are condemned; they are put to death, but it is life that they receive. They are poor, and enrich many; destitute of everything, they abound in everything. They are dishonored, and in their dishonor find their glory. They are calumniated, and are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless, they are insulted and render honor. Doing good, they are penalized as evildoers; when penalized, they rejoice because they are quickened into life....In a word: What the soul is in the body, that the Christians are in the world.”*

What a witness, huh? What a “martyros” to the resurrected Jesus. And the good news as well as the challenge is that it’s our witness as well—to which we are apostled in our day, sent out with the good news of the risen Jesus amid the empires of today.

Lord sanctify us in the truth, for your Word is truth. Amen.