

## IN DEFENCE OF JESUS

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This Sunday is the fourth Sunday in Lent, just past the mid point in our Lenten pilgrimage to the cross. We walk along side of Jesus with the disciples and the countless faithful Christians long gone over the centuries before us. We walk with our families and friends in the annual ritual we call Lent. We sense ourselves surrounded by those we have loved over the years, those who have moved on to a new relationship with God. It is an army of believers walking with their Lord to his sacrifice for us all.

This pilgrimage can be looked upon as a ritual filled with as much meaning as we are willing to seek or it can be seen as one more time to hear the story so familiar to us. Let us try to be numbered among those who wish to feel the mounting dread as we face Jerusalem and the fascination of watching this man Jesus steadfastly facing the seeming inevitability of death, the death of a man who did not seem to fit into the mould others were determined to create for him.

Today in our journey I want to concentrate on those who tried to be defenders of Jesus in his day. Jesus was not without people willing to protect him as best they could. He confounded many and perplexed others. Each person who met Jesus or found themselves in his presence was affected by him. No one could remain neutral in his presence then anymore successfully than we can do today.

In our passage this morning from John's Gospel, we witness Jesus standing up and proclaiming to his listeners. He opened with these words: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me as the scripture has said "out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water." As he was speaking, people murmured that indeed this must be one of the great prophets; others were sure he was the long awaited Christ. Others scoffed: Jesus was obviously from Galilee. Could the Christ come from such a place? You must be kidding!

Many felt Jesus should be arrested for his blasphemy but no one touched him. The officers later said to the soldiers: why did you not arrest him when you had the chance? They answered: you should have been there for no man has ever spoken like this man! Has he even fooled you, asked the Pharisees? What has this man got? Can you not see that he is a blasphemer against Almighty God?

Nicodemus who had heard Jesus before, once again said in defense of Jesus: Do our laws condemn a man even before we give him a chance to defend himself? In reply the Pharisees scoffed and again nattered on about Jesus' Galilean background. In a sense Jesus was wiped out in their minds by their indifference to and judgment of any one from Galilee.

Jesus would just shake his head in amazement and sadness at the unwillingness of people to listen, especially those who knew the Old Testament witness to God's concern for all creation and God's love and commitment for men and women everywhere.

Now, think back with me to the story Jesus told of the rich man with his feasting and Lazareth the poor man begging for the crumbs left under the table. The rich man had no time for Lazareth and would not share any of his bounty with this beggar. Lazareth dies and arrives in heaven. The rich man also dies but ends up not in heaven but in hell. The rich man sees Lazareth and begs him to help him in his agony. When Lazareth indicates the chasm between them is too great, the former rich man begs Lazareth to go back to earth and warn his brothers to change their hard hearted ways before it is too late. Jesus concludes this story by saying that even if Lazareth was raised from the dead and sent back, it would not move this bunch.

Jesus was very conscious that his death on the cross and his resurrection three days later would not be easily believed by many. Men and women are hard to get through to once they have made up their mind in certainty, not wishing to change their position even by such an action. So much easier to scoff than to believe even when they see Jesus the man and watch him in action.

Do you recall the Good Friday event where three men on three crosses were crucified on the hill known as Golgotha? Jesus hung there flanked on each side by a criminal. With nothing to lose, one of the thieves goads Jesus. If you are the Son of God as you and the people say, free yourself and us from the cross now and save our lives. However, the second criminal disagrees and chides the other by saying in Jesus' defense: This man is innocent while we two criminals are getting our expected punishment for our evil and illegal deeds in the past. Then he quietly asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes into his kingdom.

Jesus is amazed by this man's statement and answers in the affirmative. Not only will I remember you but I will this day walk with you in Paradise. What an amazing reward for this act of honesty, faith and seemingly simple though audacious request after his defense of Jesus. So to do we sing the simple request for ourselves in the hymn: Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

Do you recall the event on Good Friday when Jesus was arrested after Judas Iscariot marked out Jesus for the soldiers so they could arrest him? Disillusioned and angry that Jesus refused to lead an uprising against the occupying Roman conquerors, Judas decided it was best to rid the world of this man. Peter, however, decided to try to defend Jesus, grabbed a sword and lopped off the ear of a servant of the soldiers. Jesus stopped Peter, healed the man's ear and gave himself up, commenting that it was not impossible for him to rail and overcome those against him but he chose not to do so.

Peter you recall went on to deny knowing Jesus three times on the night of Jesus' crucifixion. Broken hearted for his cowardice and his inability to stand up and tell the world he knew Jesus, Peter wept for his betrayal. Thus it was that after the resurrection, Peter in his joy still felt unworthy due to his cowardly actions of betrayal. And yet, Jesus

called on Peter for a key role as his witness and called him the rock on which he would build his church.

In Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of each believer becoming a new creature. Peter who had betrayed Jesus three times and Paul himself who had led Christians to the slaughter: these were the men Christ called to be leaders in the church, witnesses and defenders in their call to others to a faith in Christ the Risen Lord.

We read these words from Paul: "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ."

What a wonderful passage and a great statement of the wonder that occurred with the death and resurrection of Jesus. As defenders of the faith we are in the role of reconcilers one to another.

Paul goes on to say this: "Working together with God, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Paul is saying that we have heard the story of Christ's sacrifice for each one of us and of God's overwhelming love for every man and woman. So, he declares, what are you planning to do with this information? He implores us to not just hear about this but to openly accept it for ourselves. Now is the acceptable time he declares. Why put it off? What are you waiting for? Either you believe in what Jesus has done for us and the great picture of our Creator God or you do not. What holds you back? Now is the day of our salvation. Get on with a decision for God.

The excitement of the Christian faith has been there for 2000 years. For centuries men and women have been confronted by the man Jesus through the words and actions of other believers. Our task is to be a conduit for God's love for others who are seeking the faith.

Around the world the Christian church is under attack, either overtly or indirectly. Today the Christian church in India is facing the Hindu extremists who are burning Christian bibles and church buildings. Modern media feels free to taunt the Christian faith while being very careful not to offend other religions.

It is our responsibility as Christians to defend what we know to be true, to be proud of speaking about the wonders of God as we have seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who we venerate as our living Saviour and Lord.

How can we be quiet? We need not be afraid for God is with us as we witness to what we have experienced in our own lives.

Our Lenten pilgrimage is a time to take stock of not only the actions of Jesus but our own actions in response to God's love. Why are we afraid? Why do we keep quiet? Have we nothing to say?

We think back to the early settlers in this place. For whatever reason they left their home and dwelling to move to this area, when they got here they built a church for the worship of God and a gathering place for the community.

They faced great odds, suffering deprivations, cold and hard times. Yet in spite of all that, they survived and thrived in spite of the odds against them.

We need to remember again that when the earthly ministry of Jesus came to a grinding halt with his death, all appeared lost. A disheartened group of believers gathered together to tell their stories and to share their disappointment and disbelief. Then came the wondrous news of the resurrection of Jesus and they were filled with joy.

Then, the dawning came to them and they were afraid. This was their realization that the news of who Jesus was and what his significance for men and women everywhere was and is was not going to go anywhere unless they got into action and witnessed to what they knew and had experienced.

Against enormous odds in a climate of animosity and fear, Christian communities sprung up as people responded to the news of Jesus. This early church was defenseless except in their determination not to stop telling others what they had experienced and knew to be true.

Christians died for their faith and their martyrdom brought others to Christ. We must not be afraid to witness to our faith nor to ask others to share their faith journey with us.

Our Lenten pilgrimage to the cross should strengthen our faith and our resolve to be active doers in the faith, for how can we sit quietly when the faith we have calls us to witness for Christ in all we do and say.

Defenders for Christ, a key and exciting role for all of us to play now and always.