

Sermon for Morning Prayer: The First Sunday after Easter
Morning Prayer B
by
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First Lesson: Isaiah 43: 1-12

“But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.

“Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God.”

Second Lesson: Luke 24: 36-49

“And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

Body:

A priest in the old Episcopal Church was in his office one day when his secretary came in to tell him that a couple of Jehovah's witnesses were there to see him. The rector replied in his big voice loud enough to be heard outside, “Tell them that around here I am Jehovah's witness.”

Putting aside the problem of using Jehovah as a name for God, I have a slight problem with that response. My

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¹ Acts 1: 21-22 (KJV).

² Luke 24: 44-48 (KJV) (emphasis supplied).

³ I Corinthians 11: 26 (RSV).

The English word “martyr” is derived from the Greek word “Martus”, which in the New Testament is translated as “witness”. You cannot be a martyr unless you are a witness to the Gospel in your life. But you can be a witness to the Gospel without being a martyr.

That is what most of us are called upon to be. Let us remember, however, that even as I speak there are witnesses in other parts of the world who are paying for their testimony with their blood.

The Jews who live today did not personally experience the Exodus from Egypt or the restoration from Babylon, but when they celebrate the Passover they ally themselves with those who did experience them personally. So St. Paul says of the Eucharist, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”³ Every time we receive Holy Communion we ally ourselves with those who were eyewitness to the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

We can never be Apostles ourselves, because we were not eyewitnesses to the death and Resurrection of Jesus. But our bishops today stand in succession to those who were as guardians of their testimony. When we are confirmed, we are joined not only to the Apostles but to that great host of witnesses in every generation who have not been dissuaded by the threat of death but have testified to the effect of the Gospel on their own lives. In being joined to them, we are joined to Christ himself.

All of us, not just clergy, are called to be witnesses, and it is only through the exercise of that duty that the Gospel can be spread. In the part of the world in which you live, *you* are Jehovah’s witness.

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objection is that all of us, not just the clergy, are called to witness to the world in behalf of God.

A witness is someone who testifies about what he has personally seen or heard, or, in the case of an expert witness, what he knows through disciplined study. Those of us who have seen the hand of God at work in the world, or better yet in our own lives, are called by God to give testimony to that experience.

People in what we call “fundamentalist” churches do this all the time. They can’t wait to tell you about their experience of conversion -- what their lives were like before that experience, how it happened, when and where, and how their lives are different now. That’s one kind of testimony, and Anglicans tend to shy away from it, partly I think because we consider it bad form, and partly because most of us have never had a dramatic conversion experience. Most of us can’t remember a time when we were not Christians, and most of us have just grown over time into the faith that we now have.

But there are other kinds of witnessing and other things to witness to besides a dramatic conversion experience. The Old Testament lesson for today talks about witnessing to the power and glory of God and His activity in the world.

In the passage from Isaiah, God calls Israel to testify to the world that God has delivered them from bondage, not once but twice -- once from Egypt, and again from Babylon. Isaiah paints a picture of gathering an audience of gentiles to hear the testimony of Israel.

“Bring forth the blind people that have eyes and the deaf that have ears.” That’s a way of mocking the idolatry of the Gentiles. It echoes the 115th Psalm, which reads in part:

“Their idols are silver and gold, even the work of men’s hands.

They have mouths and speak not; eyes have they and see not.

They have ears and hear not; noses have they and smell not.

They have hands and handle not; feet have they and walk not,

Neither speak they through their throat.

They that make them are like unto them, and so are all such as put their trust in them.”

Isaiah goes on to say, “Let all the nations be gathered together and let the people be assembled. Who among them can declare this and show us former things? Let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified; or let them hear, and say, ‘It is truth.’”

And then the prophet, speaking as God, says to Israel, “You are my witnesses.”

The whole scene prefigures the closing verses of St. Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus sends his disciples into all the world to preach the gospel to the gentiles. He sends them as witnesses to his passion and His Resurrection.

You will recall that when the disciples met to select a successor to Judas as one of the twelve, they said, “Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning with the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.”¹ The first requirement to be an Apostle is to be an eyewitness to the Resurrection.

The church is the new Israel, and the twelve Apostles represent the heads of the twelve tribes. As such they are called

to be witnesses to the power and glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and to testify of the mighty works by which he delivered them from bondage -- not the bondage of Egypt and Babylon, but the bondage of sin and death.

And so Jesus in the post-Resurrection appearance recorded in the Second Lesson says to the little band which was the primitive church gathered on Easter evening,

“These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the psalms concerning me. Then he opened their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **AND YE ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS.”²**

The Holy Scriptures contain the recorded testimony of these witnesses – the testimony of Old Israel, and the testimony of the new Israel, which is the church. And to the testimony of the Apostles has been added the testimony of hundreds of thousand of witnesses who have testified before the rulers of this world concerning their experience with God. Some of them are called “martyrs” because they confirmed their testimony with their blood.

One of these martyrs, a bishop named Polycarp, was burned at the stake in 155 A.D. He was given many opportunities to save his life by cursing Christ. The Roman proconsul begged him to do so, but Polycarp said, “Eighty six years have I served him and he never did me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”