

*THE EMPHASIS IS ON DOING GOD'S WILL*

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The Sixth Sunday in Easter, Year A

Acts 17:22-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Peter's letter, this morning's epistle, is written to Christians who are suffering for doing what is right. He tells them not to be intimidated, but in their hearts to sanctify Christ as Lord. Keep your conscience clear, he counsels, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

In the Gospel, the Christian hope is buttressed by the promise from Jesus that he will give the disciples the spirit of truth who will abide in them as he abides in Jesus.

Both readings this morning were written at a time when those choosing to follow Jesus were in real danger from the political authorities of a culture that was hostile to Christians, as it had been to their Jewish predecessors. Peter and Jesus are trying to give the disciples the courage to maintain their faith in the midst of persecution and suffering.

What was not being contemplated at that time was the possibility that Christians themselves might someday become the cultural/religious majority under whom people of different faiths might be treated as the early Christians were treated by the Roman authorities.

But, as we know, shortly after the Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire, Christians began to develop the idea that Christianity had superseded Judaism in the eyes of God. Christians were to replace the Jews as God's chosen people. Those who persisted in maintaining their commitment to Judaism came increasingly to be seen as a race responsible for the death of Jesus. Aided and abetted by some passages from Scripture, such as the one from last week's lessons that suggest that one can come to God only through Jesus, Christians began to justify the persecution of Jews, and later of Muslims, which, over time, led to the Crusades, anti-Semitism, the horrors of the pogroms, the Holocaust, and today a deep hostility to Islam, all because people claiming to speak for Christianity refused to recognize the rights of conscience on the part of those who would not accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior or to regard Him as the *only* way through which they could come to God. From a time when Christians were under attack for their beliefs, they became the perpetrators, not the targets of persecution.

Some of this odious Christian behavior can be explained by the simple fact of the arrogance of power. When any group, political or religious, achieves power over others it comes to believe (partly out of the need for self-validation) that it is justified in imposing its morality, and the religion which undergirds it, on others. As Christians we are no more immune to the temptations of power and self-righteousness than are any other human groups. And when it is a religious group that succumbs to these temptations, it will cloak its use of power in the garments of moral righteousness and a belief that it is doing the will of God. That is why religious groups, both on the right and on the left, have often taken to imposing their views on anyone who does not subscribe to their particular view of what is morally right for everyone. When people argue about things that are not central to the human condition, they will often accept the possibility of a reasonable compromise or even the possibility of being wrong. But when ultimate matters are stake, one side or the

other eventually resorts to playing the moral and religious trump card: my morality, my doctrines, my beliefs, are absolutely right because they are given by God and yours are not. Now all this is related to this morning's gospel and epistle because Christians, of all people, should be sensitive to the rights of conscience and the use of power to abuse people who, by their own lights, as well as by every external test, are doing the will of God. There are many people in this world who have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior: they do not believe that Jesus is the ONLY way to God. And yet many of these people, including Jews and Muslims, are fellow members of the same Abrahamic tradition to which we belong, and they lead good and decent lives, committed to the same moral principles that we as Christians are committed to: justice, compassion, mercy, and love. And yet historically Christians have violently persecuted many of these same people simply because they could not bring themselves to affirm Jesus as the Christ for them, or did not believe that they had been superseded or replaced by Christianity in the eyes of God. And even when violent attempts at converting those who are not Christian are not employed, there is a lack of respect for their beliefs and moral convictions when they are made the object of aggressive proselytizing. This is particularly reprehensible when the person who is the object of conversion is already a living embodiment of the same moral principles that Jesus commends to all who would live as his disciples. Christians may do the works of justice and love by sanctifying Christ in their hearts, but Peter does not insist that *all* persons must sanctify Christ in order to do good works. Jesus says that those who keep his commandments will be loved by his Father. The emphasis here is not on believing but on *doing* what is God's will: the affirmation of doctrinal or creedal formulas about Jesus that emerged only after his resurrection is secondary to the quality of one's life and deeds. Surely we have better things to do in this short life than to worry about whether good and decent people accept Jesus exactly as we do: is it not enough that they are doing the works God intends all of us to do? Is it not enough that they are binding up the wounds of the suffering, and working to bring relief and justice to the poor and oppressed? It seems profoundly intolerant, self-righteous, and mean-spirited to insist that the truly good people in this world, regardless of their religious convictions, can only come into God's mansion if, after a life of doing what Jesus did (without naming Jesus as their savior), they have to become Christian in creed and belief as well. Too much evil and inhumanity has been inflicted by an inflated Christian zeal to Christianize everyone else for us to continue to insist that a specific creedal belief is the ticket to heaven, especially when that belief has been forcibly rammed down people's throats in brutal ways throughout history. Instead we should celebrate those lives, whether explicitly Christian or not, that have emulated the *life* that Jesus lived, and performed the *deeds* that he did, even when they are not able, for the sake of conscience, to utter the name of Jesus as their Lord and Savior. If Peter insists on the right of conscience for Christians under siege, then surely we Christians should insist on the same right of conscience for those now under siege by a Christian majority that seeks to impose its version of Christianity on everyone else. God's grace is more than sufficient for the salvation of all: we should put no barriers of our own making in the way of that grace reaching all persons, regardless of whether they are "officially" Christian or not.

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