

Proper 28 – 25 Pentecost – Year C – November 14, 2010
Isaiah 65: 17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19
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In this morning's special report here's an update on the lives of some of the first followers of Jesus Christ from correspondent Frank Mead. The report is shocking. "James the brother of Jesus and James the son of Zebedee preach and are killed by mobs in Jerusalem. Mathew is slain on a sword in Ethiopia. Philip is hanged in Phrygia; Bartholomew flayed alive in Armenia. Andrew is crucified in Achaia. Thomas is run through with a lance in East India. Thaddeus is shot to death with arrows. A cross goes up in Persia for Simon the Zealot, and another in Rome for Peter. Matthias is beheaded. Only John escapes a martyr's grave."

There has not been a single century since God sent Jesus into the world, where His disciples have escaped persecution and martyrdom. It is a very sobering thought, and one that no follower of Christ can or should ignore. *Fox's Book of Martyrs* contains more than three hundred and fifty pages detailing the lives of Christian martyrs from the early church to the early nineteenth century. The book of martyrs is a depressing read, and would hardly qualify as an attractive résumé of the rewards of Christian discipleship. Sadly, this litany of violence and oppression against Christians continues to this day. There is no hiding the truth here: discipleship is a risky business, and not to be entered into lightly. In one way or another, and by all accounts, being a member of the Body of Christ will cost each of us our lives. However, in giving up our lives to Christ, we will we gain our souls, and our souls' eternal joy. As Jesus told his disciples, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

There's no doubt that if we had walked the streets of Jerusalem before 70 A.D., the year in which the Temple was destroyed, we too would have been awed by the splendor of its architectural grandeur. Like the great cathedrals of Europe, we are impressed by the feats of engineering and masonry, and overwhelmed by the breathtaking beauty of the design. There is also no doubt that if we had been walking along with Jesus and heard His prophetic words, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another" we too would have been astounded. Our admiration at the feast before our eyes would quickly turn to shock and dismay at Jesus' words. It's like the moment in the movie *Titanic*, right after the ship has hit the iceberg when Mr. Ismay demands to know when they are going to get underway again. The senior officers are talking with the ship's designer, Mr. Andrews, and they all hear the bad news that the damage is so extensive that the ship will sink. Mr. Ismay declares, "She can't sink", to which Mr. Andrews replies, "This ship is made of iron, sir, and I assure you she can sink." While many who boarded the doomed *Titanic* saw only the splendor of human achievement, the disciples are equally dazzled by the magnificence of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus, on the other hand, sees a vision in which the Temple is destroyed. Therefore, as He too looks, only Jesus truly sees and alone marks the sign, just beyond the perception of His disciples that says in bold print, "Condemned Property".

As if that wasn't enough bad news for one day, the curiosity bug immediately bites the disciples: "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign?" They had to ask, didn't they? They couldn't just leave it alone, let it be, bite their tongues, or ponder the mystery of this man called Jesus. Oh no, they had to ask. And Jesus tells them. Not only does it get much more terrifying, with massive shifts in geological, and political power structures causing earthquakes, wars, and famines, it also gets very personal. They will each have to endure betrayal, hatred, and persecution for the sake of Christ's name. Then Jesus says, "This will give you an opportunity to testify." How odd this all seems. Jesus tells us that the worldwide events that foment fear, and bring with them tremendous pain, suffering, and levels of uncertainty on an unprecedented scale, are merely a backdrop to the great drama of speaking God's truth, of testifying to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So much for the bad news! I'm sure that we all want to know where the good news is in today's Gospel reading. Well, at first glance, it seems that our major task is to stand firm in our faith, trusting that

God is in control. God's word is not diminished or destroyed by earthquake or war, famine or plague, or even in the passing of years. God's word endures, empowers, and enlivens faith in all who hear our testimony. According to Paul's letter to the Romans, "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Hands up if you have lived your whole life to date and never felt any kind of pain: physical, emotional, or spiritual. Hands up if you are confident that you've never experienced any kind of suffering or loss in your life, and never will. We could do a survey of everyone in the Pinetop-Lakeside and Show Low area and get the same result. All humanity is marked by the common experience of suffering, as well as the concomitant feelings of deep fear, abandonment, betrayal, helplessness, and even despair. Yet it is our faith that delineates how we deal with the challenges of life. According to Jesus, since we have all participated in some form of pain or suffering, we have all been blessed with a gift from God. That gift is the words of our witness to our faith in Christ Jesus. It is said, "Our testimony is the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear, and the boldness to speak in the face of suffering." We have words of hope, because suffering changes us. African American theologian, Howard Thurman, has witnessed this transformation firsthand. The change in people is like another gift of God. He says, "Into their faces comes a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way."

Douglas Burton-Christie tells the story of the last weeks of his friend, Donald Nicholl's life. Donald was his former professor and a scholar of Russian theology. In his own writings, Nicholls had become convinced that suffering is part of God's redemptive work in each of us, and that we grow in compassion through our suffering. Burton-Christie goes on to say, "The growth of compassion in us also makes the idea of separation from God unimaginable. This is the great gift of the martyrs to us, the truth they bear witness to; that our entire lives are suffused with God's love; that we are already living at the edge of eternity. In [his] last days, Donald [seemed] to become intensely aware of this truth.... [He] already seemed to be living in a new, transfigured world.... looking out onto a different horizon, already walking toward it." About that time Donald told Burton-Christie, "I need to be bathed in the unconditional love of God which is heaven, plunged in the ocean of pure love so that my whole being is cleansed of my selfishness; and my ego is swept away entirely. I have a longing for that boundless love."

You and I, also live on the edge of eternity, bathed in God's love. Even now, we too are being cleansed of our selfishness and swept into the tide of God's boundless love. None of us know God's plan for our lives. We only know what God has promised that through our endurance we will gain our souls. This is the kind of endurance described as a constancy of faith, as patience, and perseverance despite suffering. It is the faithfulness of the servants found at work when their master returns. Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew that the end of the world was tomorrow. He replied, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." Sharing our stories is like planting. Just as Paul says in his first letter to the church in Corinth, we plant a seed or a tree that someone else may water, "but God [gives] the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). The final gift of God from today's Gospel reading is freedom from anxiety about our own future. By God's grace and our faith in Christ Jesus, our salvation is assured. We live each day to the fullest with joyful hearts in the hope and confidence of the resurrection promise. We are set free from all anxiety and fear, because our lives *are* suffused, and transformed by God's perfect love. Our God is an awesome God. Our faith and trust is in the Lord.

Amen.