

4 Easter – Year B – May 6, 2009 - Homily
Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
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The debate continues! Jesus' teachings have not died with Him, but are as alive as the risen Lord Himself! In the early stages of the differentiation between the Jews and the new Jewish sect that would eventually become known as Christians, the rulers, elders and scribes maintained that Jesus' teachings did not correspond to their understanding and teaching of Torah. In the reading from the Book of Acts, we hear about Peter who has been called to answer the challenge to orthodoxy. It is a situation that is not unlike one we continue to face today especially in an increasingly pluralistic society. Who is speaking the truth about God? Does what I preach and teach as a Christian contain the exclusive truth about God? Is there anything to be learned from other faiths that might inform Christianity? In the meantime, why does Christianity seem to be the religion most frequently targeted as being intolerant of other religious claims and doctrines?

There is no argument that Christians do hold specific and incomparable beliefs that are definitely not shared by any other religious groups in the world. If I believed that all religious claims were equal and valid, I would not be Christian. But I don't believe that. It is not what I have learned from the Scriptures. It isn't what thousands of years of faithful Christians have taught. Nor does it align with my intellectual research into matters of faith and spirituality, or my experience of God's grace in Christ Jesus. The reality is that we live in relativistic and secular times, where it has become normative to hear religious tolerance described in ways like, "Whatever you believe is okay for you. I'll believe what I want, and you can do the same. Just don't tell me what to believe or even what you believe and we'll all get along just fine." The cultural message is that faith is a private matter between an individual and their deity -- or not -- as the case may be. In today's society, Christianity or even faith in general is not widely acknowledged as a matter for community or any type of public gathering. Even when it comes to basic ethics like working together for the common good, it seems that if more than three people get in a room together, no one can decide what the "good" really is anymore.

In the Christian community that is the Body of Christ also called the Church, we proclaim Jesus Christ as the only Son of God. We also believe that Jesus, God incarnate, is fully human as well as fully divine. We believe in the Holy Trinity. We make claims that are not popular in today's culture, such as Jesus being the definitive expression of how to live our lives in full accord with God's will. Christians declare Jesus' death and resurrection as *the* complete and singular act of redemption for the sins of the whole world, reconciling all humanity to God in Christ. Many religions do not even acknowledge human sinfulness at all. Indeed, for anyone who does not believe in human sinfulness, they are not likely to believe that they need a savior. Why would they? In Christianity, we know that our need for a Savior is predicated on the fact that something has gone terribly wrong with the human condition that only God, in fact, only God incarnate, namely Jesus Christ, could remedy. God's story of salvation as told to us through the Scriptures, points to God's concern for all creation, not just a few people or a few geographical areas. God cares about the whole kit and caboodle. Whatever our differences, be they social, economic, political, you name it -- God's deepest desire is expressed as love and concern for all. God does not desire death or disease for anyone. God is the One that gives abundant life, sustains all life, and returns us to new and unending life through the gift of salvation by faith in Christ Jesus.

When it comes to our Christian doctrines, we do have exclusive claims that are wholly disagreeable to many people in our pluralistic society. That does not mean that we should hide the Light of our life in shame or fear, or even under the false pretense of religious tolerance. It is worth asking ourselves whether we have fallen into the trap of using religious tolerance as an excuse to avoid the Great Commission. Remember that Jesus commands all his followers to make disciples of all nations in His name. Is it really being intolerant to live in the integrity of our faith? Would we expect a faithful Muslim to abandon their mosque if it made us feel uncomfortable to hear the call to prayer? What if you and I are

simply feeling the resistance, as our commitment and witness to Christ enlivens the Spirit of the Living God and disturbs the minds and hearts of others? What if the Christian witness of the Body of Christ is powerfully shaking the complacency of those who do not yet know Jesus, and their fear-filled response is projected onto us in the shape of accusations of intolerance. Can you think of any entity in the world today that would be thrilled if Christians stopped sharing the Gospel message?

You and I are commanded by Jesus Himself to share the Good News in our words and our deeds. It is ultimately not within the scope of our concern, or the grasp of our greedy intellectual desire, to know God's plan for those who profess different religious beliefs. But it is entirely in God's plan that you and I play a crucial role in sharing the Gospel, building up the Body of Christ, bringing more of the kingdom to this world, and continuing Jesus' work of reconciling all to God through Him. Henri Nouwen once wrote, "You are Christian only so long as you look forward to a new world, so long as you pose critical questions to the society you live in, so long as you emphasize the need of conversion both for yourself and for the world, ... so long as you stay unsatisfied with the *status quo* and keep saying that a new world is yet to come. You are Christian only when you believe that you have a role to play in the realization of this new Kingdom, and when you urge everyone you meet with a holy unrest to make haste so that the promise might soon be fulfilled." (End quote). God has spoken in the Word made flesh, and through His glorious resurrection in His victory over sin and death. Jesus' teachings and the story of His life are only alive in the world because His followers obey His commandments to love God, love our neighbors, and share the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.