

3rd Sunday of Easter, 18 April 2021

Scriptures: Acts 3:13-15,17-19; 1 John 2:1-5; Luke 24:35-48

Homily: Fr. Ken

In the Gospel, Jesus finished speaking to the disciples with this warning: "You are witnesses of these things".

Why do I say "warning"? In Koine Greek, that is, in New Testament Greek, the word for "witness" is the same word as the word for "martyr". At that moment of listening to Jesus, the disciples may not have been entirely delighted to be chosen for that role.

The early Christians would have been aware that those who were appointed as witnesses to Christ might very well be called upon to follow his example and lay down their very own lives for him.

St. Stephen, and St. Peter and St. Paul, and St. James the Great, to name only a very few from the first years of the Church's existence, did, in fact, die a martyr's death. And, as we know well from history, many more have done so over the twenty centuries since then, in all parts of the world. Moreover, as we are also well aware, the very threat of death due to our Christian faith remains real in our world today.

How real, you may ask? Today, Christians are the most persecuted group in the entire world. The most recent studies found that approximately 90,000 Christians are killed for their religious faith each year. In fact, for the 10 year period from 2005-2015, over 900,000 Christians were martyred.

How many is 900,000? It is 273 killed each day; 11 killed every hour; 1 killed every six minutes. By the end of our two Sunday Masses this morning, 20 more Christians will have been martyred because of their Christian faith.

Looking back to the time of Jesus' resurrection and after Pentecost, we can ask: To what exactly did the apostles bear witness?

They bore witness to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was obviously not necessary to bear witness to the Crucifixion of Christ, as that was common knowledge. Indeed, some of those to whom Peter later preached had themselves been instrumental in having Jesus crucified.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter relates the crucifixion as an undoubted fact, but then goes on stating: "God, however, raised Jesus from the dead, and to that fact, we are witnesses".

On another occasion, recorded elsewhere in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter, when speaking before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, said: "By his own right hand God has now raised him up to be leader and savior...We are witnesses to all this".

In our own time now, in 2021 today, we are called to be witnesses to Christ. And we may wonder: Will we also be called to be martyrs? It may not seem likely in our California state, or in our time on Earth.

But we are not far removed from it.

In 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated in El Salvador while he was celebrating Mass in a hospital chapel.

In the year 2000, there was a 20th anniversary commemoration of Archbishop Romero's martyrdom. Delegations traveled from around the world to participate in the San Salvador cathedral. Among them was a delegation from San Francisco that included members from our St. Rita parish. While there, our parishioners met a priest working in Guatemala who introduced them to a Carmelite Sister who needed a school for the poor children of a remote Guatemalan rural village. That was the beginning of our

St. Rita Guatemala Mission Project that continues today. Nearly every year, a delegation of St. Rita parishioners visits our various educational and health projects.

Early on in Guatemala, we also connected with St. James parish and school in the lakeside town of Santiago Atitlan, and have been assisting them ever since. Years ago, their Oklahoma pastor, Fr. Stanley Rother was highly respected and much loved by the people because of his dedication to them: learning the Mayan dialect; translating the New Testament into Mayan; and engaging in a multitude of projects to help the poor. He stood by them during the Guatemalan civil war. In time, he was assassinated in 1981 by the Guatemalan military because of his support for the indigenous poor. In 2017, he was beatified by Pope Francis. Canonization (sainthood) is soon to follow.

We, today, are not eyewitnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus, as Peter and the apostles were. What we can bear witness to is that we have faith, that we accept what has been passed down to us from the original apostles, and what we have experienced in the religious faith of our own lives.

That may seem a relatively safe way to be a witness. But perhaps not so. Many witnesses in criminal trials may have wished that they had not been so aware of what was going on; that they had been looking the other way; that they had not been so sharp eyed.

Perhaps we may come to wish that we had not heard the Lord calling us in the night, that we had not recognized Jesus in the stranger on the road, that he had not opened our minds to understand the Scriptures, that our hearts had not burned within us as we read of him in the Bible.

Then we would not have been called to be his witnesses. But we did hear him, we did recognize him; and we are his witnesses in the world today. That is his calling to each and everyone of us.