

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 22:30; 23:6-11

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Wishing to determine the truth about why Paul was being accused by the Jews, the commander freed him and ordered the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to convene. Then he brought Paul down and made him stand before them. Paul was aware that some were Sadducees and some Pharisees, so he called out before the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees; I am on trial for hope in the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the group became divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, while the Pharisees acknowledge all three. A great uproar occurred, and some scribes belonging to the Pharisee party stood up and sharply argued, "We find nothing wrong with this man. Suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" The dispute was so serious that the commander, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, ordered his troops to go down and rescue Paul from their midst and take him into the compound. The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage. For just as you have borne witness to my cause in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 16:1-2a and 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

Keep me, O God, for in you I take refuge; I say to the LORD, "My Lord are you." O LORD, my allotted portion and my cup, you it is who hold fast my lot.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

I bless the LORD who counsels me; even in the night my heart exhorts me. I set the LORD ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body, too, abides in confidence; Because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

You will show me the path to life, fullness of joys in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

GOSPEL: John 17:20-26

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed saying: "I pray not only for these, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father,

are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me. Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me. I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 7th Thursday of Easter

Paul is an interesting character. Before faith in Jesus, he had faith in Judaism to the point of being a zealot who pursued fellow Jews who believed in Jesus. He arrested and killed them. Yet, this man became a faithful and powerful missionary, or apostle, who was a mainstay that formed the Church to which we belong today; not just our Catholic one but all who believe in Jesus. I have some faithful Protestant Christian relatives. We can all trace our faith back to the preaching of Paul.

Some times he has whined and complained of how hard he sometimes had it. And he did! Traveling by foot could take weeks. He had to work his trade to support his ministry. His fervor for the faith sometimes got him into trouble, like in today’s reading. As a preacher myself, I am in awe with his power of reasoning and eloquence. I marvel at his inspiration, which is the source of his message and, as inspiration implies, is the in-breathing of the Spirit of God.

He was also wily. He used his wits to get out of trouble, today. He was safe, or saved by Roman intervention. This intervention led him to Rome where we believe he died; martyred for his faith in Jesus, whose followers he first tried to kill. An irony for the ages. I believe that his past actions of persecution were his great “thorn in his side.” He was never able to escape his past; the killings would never be undone. Not only were Paul’s words inspired by God, his get out of jail trump card helped him to fulfill his earthly mission in Rome, the center of Empire. He brought the power and grace of God, as he preached the gospel, to the center of world power. He would die in the process, but from there the gospel continued to spread until our day and within us.

This is a spoiler. You can always read the story your self in the Acts of the Apostles. It’s a good one. Paul appeared before tribunals and committees, but contrary to what everyone thinks, the scriptures never tell how Paul died. Acts ended with Paul living in rented quarters, receiving guests and preaching the good news. The story of Paul’s beheading is part of Tradition that is handed down the ages by oral memory and belief. When the book ends, Paul still lives.

This man, with whom we have journeyed for these weeks after Easter, had much impact upon the Church. His faith and his approach to it are part of the fabric of the entire Church of Christ in all its diversity. His dogged drive set loose the Spirit into the world and into our lives. I, for one, am grateful for his faith filled life. Are you?

Jesus' words resonate through the millennia directly into our ears. It's not an echo we hear, but Jesus' voice. He said in plain language that he prayed for us. We believe in his name through the words of the apostles. The glory Jesus offered us is knowing his living presence through, with, in and among us. Through our gift of faith, we know the Father, Jesus, ourselves and one another. Because we believe, we share Jesus' life. Glory in God's presence is as close as our thoughts. The mere thought of God will propel us into glory. God rushes upon us in those moments where we glimpse God's oneness and mystery. God's in-dwelling of us is not fleeting. We have it always and until the end of the age, as Jesus promised.

Oneness is where we can have a problem. There's division all around; among nations, politics, business, the Church and even families. We all have opinions that we can treat as facts. I have trouble getting along, sometimes, with my sister. However, despite our differences we are still one family. We can, in faith, find common ground. This is the way that Jesus prayed for us; that we may be one in his love. Jesus stands between those with whom we are divided to keep rivals apart but also to be the link that can unite us. Through faith we can know in everyone we meet a fellow daughter or son of God and a sibling of Jesus. God made us all in God's image and likeness. God is reflected in all of us. The oneness is there as God is. All we need do is seek; and God will make us find. This is the promise of "Renew My Church." Aren't our three parishes to unite as one? This is a sign of the continued renewal of the Church, adapting to the changing environment we find ourselves in and the needs of the people.

May God's love shine in us always.

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