

Speaking up for faith and hope. Easter 6A/ Memorial Day St. George. Fr. Hugh. 5/29/2011

A man went to see his elderly aunt. She greeted him warmly and he followed her to the dining room table where she said,

“I’m so glad you came. I need you to help me with this puzzle. According to the picture on the box it’s supposed to be a rooster, but I haven’t got very far with it.”

He looked at the pieces spread on the table, looked at the box, and looked at her.

Then he gently took her by the hand and said:

“First, let’s put all the Cornflakes back in the box; then I think we need a large drink.”

In our scripture reading this morning St. Peter says: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you about the reason for the hope that you have. Do this with gentleness and respect.”

In St. Peter’s day fears about survival and the uncertainty of the future were predominant. Life depended on appeasing the gods of the day, and Christians set themselves apart from society by refusing to participate.

They were looked upon as dissenters and were accused of undermining the common good.

There’s a remarkable similarity to the way atheists today look upon the participation of Christians in the public sphere.

Peter reminded believers to always be ready to explain to people the hope they had through Christ.

It was a hope that the world around them did not understand. Both then and now, while non-believers live with huge anxieties about survival, Christians know that they can have a confident hope that ultimately God's perfect ways will win out.

This differing view of the world made Christians social outcasts in Peter's time.

Being a social outcast is a frightening prospect, but thankfully for us, in this great nation it is not our experience as Christians.

In today's terms in the West it would be truer just to say, "Some of your friends and family will make fun of you for being a Christian and they might call you crazy for speaking up for me."

Really, how bad is that, in comparison?

How do you imagine God feels if you're too embarrassed, or too timid to speak up for Him?

How would you feel if you overheard your children's friends speak ill of you, and your children didn't say anything in your defense?

It often surprises me what people are willing to talk about and what they are not.

It never ceases to amaze me that many people these days are more willing to discuss matters of personal hygiene with people who really don't need to know, than to discuss matters of personal faith with people who really do need to know.

Of course we all have excuses for not speaking up for our faith in the Lord when the occasion presents itself.

Our excuses usually sound like:

“Faith is a private matter.”

“I don’t want people to think I’m some kind of religious fanatic.”

“I don’t want to shove my beliefs down anybody else’s throat.”

But excuses are what people without commitment use to make their ineffectiveness appear valid.

And excuses always sound lame.

Here in America the worst we risk is that people might think differently of us if we sound too religious. Which immediately begs the question...

“Are we more concerned about what other people might think of us, than about what God thinks of us?”

We all know the only right answer to that.

But thank God for people who have fought to establish and maintain our freedoms, including our religious freedom.

In a lot of other countries there is a far higher price to pay for being bold enough to speak about the hope that we have through Christ.

In Iran conversion to Christianity is a capital offense. The orphaned children left from executed Christian parents are not even allowed to go to school.

In several Arab countries people receive prison sentences just for giving someone a copy of the Bible.

In Pakistan 90% of known Christians are denied employment. If you convert to Christianity your family has all real property confiscated by law.

Depressing stuff I know, but it's true and something that as Christians we should be aware of.

In China Catholic women are forced to undergo sterilization.

In Egypt there was a law passed 150 years ago that states that no repairs can be done on a church without a permit. In the nearly thirty years since 1982 no such permits have been granted and many of the churches are seriously dilapidated. Many of them have subsequently been condemned as unsafe structures.

The new Egyptian regime is hardly likely to improve the situation for Christians.

Again in Egypt many young girls had taken to tattooing a small cross on their wrists as a sign of their faith, rather like a lot of young American kids wearing a ‘what would Jesus do?’ bracelet.

Only these young girls in Egypt are often kidnapped and tortured until they sign papers of conversion to Islam. Their torturers pour acid on their wrists to remove the sign of their chosen faith.

Then a couple of years ago, an Egyptian family who had settled in New Jersey converted to Christianity. They created a website to share their faith. A few weeks later the whole family was found dead.

Although no-one was ever convicted of the crime, there were the tell tale signs of acid-burns on the girls’ wrists.

And it has gotten far, far worse for Christians in Islamic countries in the ten years since September 11.

Yet some people in these countries are willing to take these risks because of the hope they have through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, we are thankful for the religious freedoms bravely fought for and established in this nation.

Yet back in the safe comfort zone of our democracy a lot of decent churchgoing people think, “Yes of course I believe in God, but I’m not going out on a limb to speak about Jesus in social situations. I don’t want to look like I’m out of step with modern society.

It reminds us of a man, two thousand years ago, who looked at Jesus and said, “I find no fault in this man,” and added under his breath, ‘but I’m not going out on a limb for him.’

And he washed his hands of his responsibility.

During World War Two a British soldier was fatally wounded and lay dying in the trenches.

A fellow soldier and friend bent over him and asked “Is there anything I can do for you?”

He said, “No I’m dying.”

“Well is there anyone you want me to take a message to?”

“Yes, you can send a message to this man” and he gave him a name of a man back in his hometown.

“Tell him that what he taught me as a child is helping me to die now in my last minutes.’

Months later, back in Britain, he went to the man's house.

When the man heard his message he burst into tears.

He said, "He used to be in my Sunday School class. God forgive me. I gave up teaching Sunday School years ago because I thought I was getting nowhere. I thought it was no use."

But when we share our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ it is never of no use.

A man named Robert McShane was asked this question:

"What do you think makes a good Christian?"

He gave an excellent reply:

"A good Christian makes it easy for other people to believe in God."

Ask yourself, “If I dare to speak up as to why I have this hope in Christ, how many people might I touch in my lifetime?”

Then ask yourself, “If I never dare to speak up about the importance of my hope in Christ, how many people will I touch for the Lord in my lifetime?”

Each one of us has a sphere of influence with the people God has placed in our lives, in our living rooms, in our neighborhood, in our various activities.

St. Peter calls for us to defend our faith.

We have this true hope that the world needs and finds difficult to grasp.

People need to hear the good news of Christ.

Someone out there needs to hear your story, your witness for the hope that you have in Christ.

In the words of St. Peter:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you about the reason for the hope that you have. Do this with gentleness and respect.”