

Easter 2, 2017

Persecutions Unto Life and Death

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"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;" (Philippians 3:7-10).

We have been through the shadowed paths of Lent and we have exited the Garden and found that we can stand in the resurrection of Jesus Christ by whom our salvation is assured; and so, our tendencies may be to rest on our laurels as many did in the days of Christ's resurrection but, we know that their journeys did not end at the cross and likewise we must open our eyes to the truth of the Resurrection...that God came down and conquered death and through Jesus Christ has bridged the gap offering us unmerited and eternal life.... and we, therefore, have been set free to proclaim this Gospel, the Gospel by which St. Matthew's says *shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come*" (Matt. 24:14).

In other words, our journeys are not over and maybe...more challenging times are ahead. To the Philippians Paul writes *"...for you have been granted the privilege for Christ's sake not only of believing in him but of suffering for him as well"* (Phil. 1:29). And in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians Paul tells us *"...God's judgment is just, so that you may be found worthy of the kingdom of God; it is for the sake of this that you are suffering now"* (2 Thess. 1:5). I hope we realize that the sufferings of Christ were required for our redemption and that we too must and will suffer for Christ's sake, not that we must seek suffering, but that we must expect it and endure whatever comes our way.

In an attempt to wipe out the Resurrection truth, the first Christians suffered for their belief at the hands of their own Jewish brothers who saw the followers of Jesus as a blasphemous sect being led astray by a false teacher. The devil would waste no time in stoking the coals of deception and inciting the persecutions to come... and come they did. While some of the apostles were still among them, Nero was burning Christians at the stake to illuminate his garden and cover up his own unpopularity for the fires in Rome. There are dreadful accounts, within the first four centuries, of Christians being sought out and persecuted for no other reason than claiming their own belief in Jesus as the messiah. What follows is one of several accounts, this one concerning the martyrdom of St. Polycarp:

“We write unto you, brethren, the account of the martyrs and of the blessed Polycarp, who, by his martyrdom set his seal as it were upon the persecution, and put an end to it. For nearly all the preceding events came to pass in order that to us the Lord might once again give an example of the martyrdom, which resembles the gospel story. For he waited that he might be betrayed, just as was the Lord, that we too may become imitators of him, regarding not only what concerns ourselves but also what concerns our neighbors.” (“Not what concerns ourselves, but what concerns our neighbors.” Here we see that our persecutions for Christ as well as those who are martyred for his name do so for the truth of the Gospel, which is for all mankind. Our persecutions are not a bragging point, but an example that can open the eyes of the hardest hearts) Back to Polycarp, *“For it is the part of true and constant love that a man should wish not only himself, but also all the brethren to be saved. Now blessed and noble are all the martyrdoms’ which have taken place in accordance with the will of God; for we are bound to be very reverent and to ascribe the power over all things to God. And who could fail to admire their nobility and endurance and love for their master? Some were so torn by the scourges that the structure of their flesh to the inner veins and arteries was exposed to view; but they endured it, so that even the bystanders were moved to pity and lamentation. (Who were being moved to pity? The bystanders who condoned Christian persecutions). Some reached such a pitch of noble endurance that not one of them let cry or groan escape him, showing to us all that in the hours of their torture Christ’s martyrs were absent from the flesh, or rather that standing by*

their side their Lord conversed with them." Powerful stuff and today in the 21st century the persecution rate of Christians has reached an all time high.

So, where does this leave us? What are we to do and how are we to act in world that seems to be falling apart all around us were the persecutions of our brethren are not contained but escalating? The news only illustrates, to me anyway, that the world is being run by crazy people. I am no longer surprised by the things I see nor the things I hear. I know the time we have in this present world is only a vapor but, in that time we are to endure so much. and Paul reminds us that it is being persecuted for Christ's sake that we are, conformed into the image of Christ. Being a follower of Christ is no easy calling, but how we reflect this calling in light of our persecuted state is our own personal example to those who recognize us and watch us as we expose the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

We as a Christian body have had to endure severe persecutions at the hands of the enemy and this is good for the glory of God and of the Kingdom of Heaven...but, what about our own response to the world around us? Are we guilty of persecutions ourselves? Do we throw stones when we should sow love? Do we light fires that destroy God's message of compassion because we are trying to cover up our own failures? Do we want to make an example of those whose sins are no worse than our own that we might feel we have attained some level of righteousness? Persecution can come in many forms and the devil will use whatever means necessary to destroy our ability to witness for Christ. If Christ did not come to condemn neither are we called to condemn. Compassion, love and understanding pave the way for the Gospel...the Good News of which we are to carry into all the corners of the earth.

We must not fail to understand that the devil is capable of working both sides of our human natures to his end. Our only response should be to rest in the divine presence of God in our midst letting the light of Christ expose sin for what it truly is. In this regard we can unleash the spirit of truth without throwing stones ourselves thereby aiding the enemy. As the children of God and followers of the Gospel we will beat down Satan under our feet through the love of Christ that rests in each of us. In the

words of the apocryphal book of Baruch, *“My Children, suffer patiently the wrath that is to come upon you from God: for thine enemy hath persecuted thee; but shortly thou shalt see his destruction, and shalt tread upon his neck”* (Baruch 4:25).

We must suffer persecution for the glory of our Father in heaven, but **we** are not called to persecute the world but to make Christ visible to a world that fails to see. Do not spend your days trying to find fault and expose it. In doing so we only harden further, the hearts of those who need the grace of God. The darkness does not cause the shadow but the light that permeates the darkness. If you choose to lead by walking in the light that which lies in the shadow will be exposed whether you cast a stone or not...stones hurt and turn people away but love heals and brings the brethren back to the true path. Walk in the light of God and be not deceived by the devil.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4). Walk in the light as Christ Jesus who not only walked in the light, but was that light, illuminating for us the Glory of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.