

MORNING PRAYER
TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY
11.12.23

In the second lesson for today, St. Paul is contemplating his own death, which he believes is imminent. He does not see that as a tragedy, he sees it simply as the end of his work on earth. He calls it the time of his departure. “I have fought the good fight,” he says. And that fight, as our baptismal rite tells is, is a fight “against, sin, the world, and the devil.”

“I have finished the course,” he continues. “I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give me on that day.” This is a reference to the Greek athletic events in which the winners were given crowns woven from olive branches or laurel. It may also be a reference to a scene depicted in the apocryphal book of II Esdras.

There is some disagreement about when that book was written and whether St. Paul had access to it, but let me read the passage to you:

“I, Ezra, saw on Mount Zion a great multitude which I could not number, and they were all praising the Lord with songs. In their midst was a young man of great stature, taller than any of the others, and on the head of each of them he placed a crown. But he was more glorious than they. And I was spellbound. Then I asked an angel, “Who are these, my Lord?” He answered and said to me, “These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on immortal, and they have confessed the name of God. Now they are being crowned and receive palms. Then I said to the angel, “Who is that young man who places crowns on them and puts palms in their hands?” He answered and said, “He is the Son of God, whom they confessed in the world.”

This apocryphal book was obviously written during a time when the church was under persecution, and it depicts the reward of the martyrs. That word “martyr” means a witness, and it has come to refer to those who, given a choice between death and apostasy, chose to pay the price of physical death rather than abandon their faith. They followed the words of Jesus in St. Matthew: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

But St. Paul does not say that the crown of righteousness will be given only to them. The Lord will give it, he says, “to all who love his appearing.” That’s good news for us.

In this country we are free to bear witness to our faith without fear of execution. But there are Christians in Africa and Asia who are being murdered even as I speak because they refuse to convert to Islam or because they go to church and read the Bible and talk about Jesus. How ashamed should we be because our witness is so feeble compared to theirs? Nevertheless, the Apostle includes, among those who will be given crowns, all of us who love the appearance of Christ on Earth and look forward to His coming again.

The psalmist says that a human life span is seventy, or perhaps, eighty years, but that is by no means guaranteed. There are people here today who have exceeded that age, and there have been many who died before reaching it. Death for us and for all men marks the end of our work in this world. It is up to God to decide when that will be. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away on His own schedule.

St. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, and expected to be executed. He was prepared to die. But he also prepared himself to live.

He requested Timothy to come to him and bring some things he would need to continue his work: a cloak to keep him warm as winter approaches, some books, and some parchments, which are animal skins and much more durable than papyrus. The Apostle intended to continue to serve his Lord and the church right up to the very end. And that is the attitude with which you and I must look upon our time in this world. As Yogi Berra is alleged to have said, “It ain’t over til it’s over.”

In the final prayer of the Communion service we pray, “that we may do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in.” I have often wondered what those works might be. I still do. But whatever they may be, it is my duty and my privilege to do them. It is your duty and privilege as well.

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