

## Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Apr 27th 2017

“We must obey God rather than men” Acts

At the height of the Cold War, my favorite junior high teacher would dramatically ask us if we would risk our lives defending our faith if Russian communists ever marched into Nebraska’s prairies. I imagined our class lining up outside school preparing for martyrdom or going to prison like the Christians behind the Iron Curtain that Sister Mary Jude often talked about. Would we be that brave?

Implausible as this sounds, it also was our introduction to the concept that sometimes you have to defy human rulers to obey our divine ruler, the central teaching of today’s reading from Acts. “We must obey God rather than men,” said Peter and the Apostles to the Sanhedrin who had ordered them to stop preaching about Jesus.

Happily the Russians never attacked Nebraska City so we were spared martyrdom or prison. However a few years later, every night on TV we saw Christians in our own country risking their lives and freedom to end segregation. I believed in their cause but did not grasp the spiritual connection between the civil rights protesters and the early Christians until I read Dr. Martin Luther King’s searing “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” during college.

Like Peter and the Apostles, Dr. King and his followers felt that in going to prison to defy unjust laws, they were obeying God’s higher law. Like the apostles, they believed they were “witnesses of these things (that Jesus did) as is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Dr. King’s letter had a profound impact on me as I began to understand that being a Christian demanded a willingness to witness even when that meant paying a price. This insight also was extremely uncomfortable. Although I hero-worshiped people like Dorothy Day, they did things for peace and justice that I, a conventional Midwesterner, would never do. Was this hypocritical?

Eventually I realized that witnessing can take many forms and that all of us can do SOMETHING to live our faith beyond attending church. The Sermon on the Mount tells us clearly what God expects – things like feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the stranger, comforting the afflicted etc. If we can’t find ways to obey these commands in our families, parishes and communities, we just aren’t trying.

Happily if we need to transform our lives (and who doesn’t) this is the perfect season to begin. May the Resurrection bring you new life just as it did to the early Christians.

Easter blessing and joy to all of you.

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