

Ascension Sunday, 2021

Homily by Fr. Bob Camuso

Acts 1: 1-11; Eph 1: 17-23; Lk 24: 46-53

I wonder how many of us
have ever tried to be a witness to our faith in Christ.
For example, have you ever spoken to someone
about why God matters to you?

In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles,
Jesus tells his followers, which includes us,
that we are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.
In other words, we're to go forth
and proclaim the good news of God's love for us,
the good news that our sins may be forgiven
and that after we die,
Jesus has a place prepared for us in heaven.

Yet, from my experience,
most Catholics are uncomfortable with the idea
of being a witness for Christ.
As Catholics, we're uneasy about wearing our faith on our sleeve.
We'd like to think that we're not the same
as those folks who go door-to-door
to try to convert others to their faith.
And we don't like them coming to our door
to tell us, for instance, as they quote from the Book of Revelations,
that only 144,000 people will enter heaven. *Rev 7: 4,9; 14: 1-3*

When they say that to me,
I tell them that I'm one of the 144,000!

There are, of course, many ways to be a witness for Christ
other than quoting the Bible.
An example of what I mean is found in a story
told by a British World War II veteran
who remembers his internment at a Japanese prison camp:

During the war, a group of British soldiers
were captured by the Japanese at the notorious River Kwai.
While imprisoned the captives were, at first,
very observant of their religion.
They prayed together.

They preached to one another.
They sang hymns together.
They read daily from the Bible.
They hoped and expected that God would reward their faith
or at least ease their suffering.

But when God did not deliver, the men became disillusioned and angry.
They gave up any outward display of faith.

Yet, after a while, as they began to tend to the needs of one another,
as they cared for the sick and injured, protected the weaker ones
and, in some cases, died for one another,
they began to find the presence of Christ in their midst.

They discovered that being Christian was not just
what one believed or preached to others about the Gospel.
It was to *live* the Gospel by taking up one's cross
and by doing as Jesus might do for another prisoner
when there was nothing else that could be done.

Their compassion strengthened their resolve to witness to their faith,
but in a new way, and their faith gave them the ability
to accept their situation and not give up.

Adapted from "Storm Center" by Peter J. Gomes, *The Christian Century*, May 31, 2003

This story reminds us that being a witness for Christ
is not just a matter attending Mass,
or prayer, such as praying the Rosary.
Bringing the good news of Jesus to others
is not just about our Creed,
such as telling others what we believe
and why *they* should believe what we believe.

To be a witness for Christ also means to serve, for instance,
the least among us, through whom Jesus says we serve him. Mt 25: 40
In doing so we become a witness by our example.

Those in your family, your friends, the people at work or school,
may never open the Bible or go to church.
They may never explore the richness of our Catholic tradition.
But they will watch you.
They will take note of the way you live;
the way you treat your family;
the way you make them feel;

the way you drive your car when you're in a hurry.
And some will decide about God based on your example.

What this means is that it's not easy at times to be a good example.
Our poor choices can shame us
and cause us to believe we are not worthy to be a witness for Christ.

But Jesus does not care if you and I are worthy to witness for him.
In fact, whether we are worthy to do God's work
is a false question.

For example, I know that I'm not worthy to be a priest
because, like you, I'm also a sinner.

If you asked Pope Francis if he is worthy to be a witness for Christ as Pope,
he would surely say that he is not.

After all, at every Mass we proclaim:

"Lord, I am not worthy to enter under your roof..."--Communion Rite

Yet, we also say at Mass,

"We give thanks that you *have held us worthy*
to be in your presence and minister to you." --Eucharistic Prayer II

What this means is that we are both 100% worthy
and 100% unworthy at the same time.

Each truth neutralizes the other
so that we are not taken in by false pride or false humility.

Which is where Jesus wants us to be.

He does not want the question of worthiness
to get in the way of our doing his work.

Still, there are some of us who refuse to accept that we are worthy.

We refuse to believe that the good God created in us,
in God's view, will always be greater than our sin.

Forgive the double negative, but if this were not true,
God would not forgive the same sins we commit again and again.

Our worthiness, then, does not matter.

What does matter is our desire to do God's will,
which Jesus clearly states in today's gospel
when he tells us to go and proclaim his gospel.
Especially by doing his work.

Saint Francis reaffirms this in a memorable way:

"Preach the gospel always," said Francis to his followers,
"And, if necessary, use words."

When we are willing to risk doing our part for others,
God will do the rest.

God will give us the power to be Christ for others.
This means that we never do God's work alone.

Remember that God prepares us to do God's work
by erasing our sins that cause us guilt and shame
through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In addition, we need not worry about
what we should say or do to be a witness for Christ:

Jesus assures us of that when he says:

“Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say,
for what you are to say will be given to you.” Matt 10:19

When we speak or do something for Jesus,
the grace of the Holy Spirit comes alive in us
and completes the work Jesus set out for us,
though we may not see the result.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta had another way to say this:

“I am a little pencil in God's hands.
He does the thinking.
He does the writing.
He does everything and sometimes it is really hard
because it is a broken pencil
and He has to sharpen it a little more.”

What a joy it is, then, when the light of God's grace within us
shines before others so that they may see our good works
and give glory to God in heaven. cf. Mt 5: 16.

That is what today's feast of the Ascension is about.
Jesus had to ascend to heaven to be with God, his Father.
He had to trust his disciples on earth to continue his work.
But in doing so he left the Holy Spirit
to empower them, and now us.

Today Jesus says to you and to me:

“Go into the whole world
and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”

That is our Christian calling.
Each time we choose to be a witness to someone
by our Christian example,

we store up for ourselves a treasure in heaven,
where Jesus says, “Moths and vermin do not destroy,
and where thieves do not break in and steal.” Matt 6: 19-21

Each time we are a witness for Christ,
a treasure is stored away for us,
eternally in that place Jesus called “Paradise.” Lk 23:43

Our treasures are there with the saints
along with our ancestors in Christ who have gone before us,
including parents, grandparents, and others we have loved.

Those loved ones and saints
await us at our final home with open arms and joyful hearts
where we may share with them
the bright, shining, and grace-filled treasures we’ve sent.

After all, what good are treasures
if we cannot share them,
especially with those we love?