

2nd Thursday of Easter “Church and State”
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The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is intriguing to me because it begs the question regarding the separation of “Church” and “State”. The religious rulers, who had legal standing, bring in the Apostles and tell them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and the Apostles’ response was, “We must obey God rather than men”. It interests me because, as many philosophers over the centuries will tell you, what keeps society peaceful is the idea of a social contract. Laws are meant to keep the peace. The religious rulers saw these disciples of Jesus as having the potential of starting a revolution in their community and so they want to stamp it out. Peter and the Apostle’s response indicated that they would rather die than to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, which they all eventually did...with perhaps the one exception of John who experienced no shortage of suffering. In fact the word “martyr” literally means to give witness. A shout out to St. George by the way whose feast day is today! What this all means is, to be a disciple of Jesus, we must be willing to live in the light of the Gospel even when the result could be persecution.

We have been fortunate in our country in that we have been given the freedom of religion. Even in the times we live in, we know that the “shelter in place” order is not going to be forever and that there are indeed concerns surrounding public health. There is a social contract that says we should be interested in the health and wellbeing of others...and there are ways we can continue practicing our faith in the meantime. On the other hand, there are so many places around the world where being a Christian could cause a lot of suffering for you and your family. A kid can come home from school and say “I was just baptized a Christian,” and the parents would say “Are you nuts? You just put us all in danger”. That happens today. Martyrdom still happens today in so many areas of the world.

However, it must be said though, that even in our culture, as tolerant as it is, that tolerance only goes so far. Whenever I preach on the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death, which includes the unborn, the elderly, the homeless as well as immigrants from other countries, I invariably get at least one letter or email the following week telling me to stop being “political” and even charge me of disregarding the principal of separation of Church and state. My response in that matter is usually twofold. First, as citizens of this great country, Catholics have the freedom of speech too and we will not sacrifice that, thank you very much! And second, straight from our first reading, “We must obey God rather than men” even if this means we are called to suffer for it. Discipleship must look like something.

Jesus says as much in our Gospel reading, “The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard...” Again, that word testify is in there pointing to a disciple’s responsibility to give witness. What does that look like today? It can be edgy because what is on all of our minds right now is how much sacrifice is involved with social distancing and such. And there is a large debate going on in our country as to its benefits and burdens. A Christian right now can make a good biblical argument for either side of that issue. Even bishops disagree. In our

Archdiocese, we have made the balance of complying with celebrating our liturgies online while keeping churches open for private prayer while encouraging social distancing. And I would say, rightfully so. My only gripe so far in this whole thing is that marijuana stores are considered an essential business when faith communities are not. Governor Inslee...Booo! However, the present times do beg the question of the relationship between Church and State. From my point of view, even when it feels like an arm wrestle in this country, we are least still holding hands. The readings today however provocatively challenge us, what does it mean for us as disciples of Jesus to give witness to the Gospel in the culture and times in which we live?