

Easter 7B

12 May, 2024

St Peter's by the Bay, Paynesville

“The Power and Responsibility of Testimony” sermon emphasises the importance of witnessing in a chaotic world, showcasing God’s faithfulness and grace through our lives—the story of Columba and Finian caution against conflicts over words, stressing humility in testimonies. True prosperity is found in spiritual blessings, not material wealth, embodying Jesus’ compassion and justice. Believers are called to boldly proclaim their faith and live as a testament to Christ’s love in a selfless manner.

Bearing Witness: The Power and Responsibility of Testimony

I. Introduction

A. Opening Scripture: 1 John 5:9-13 - “If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.”

In the prayer we have just read/heard, Jesus turns his advice to the disciples into a heartfelt prayer of commission. Unlike the other gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which talk a lot about prayer, this prayer in which we hear Jesus addressing not only God but also the followers.

What we know about the Gospel of John is this – it was written much later than the other gospels and addresses a world in which Jerusalem has been razed, the Temple destroyed, and Christians everywhere are under persecution.

Fast forward this to today, we live in a world inundated with noise and distraction.

Yet in this noise, the need to be witnesses to the Word of God is needed now more than ever. In witnessing, we let out thoughts, words and deeds shout from the rooftops as we live, speak and share the love of God in Christ Jesus. This is our great commission as witnesses to everything we have seen.

On Thursday, to commemorate the Ascension of the Lord, we hear of the eleven who were gathered and commissioned as witnesses to take the Gospel to the ends of the world, beginning in Jerusalem. This was even despite some of the eleven doubting. Today, we also read about the need for two men confident in speech to replace the late Judas Iscariot. And by lot, Matthias was chosen.

And it is in that confidence and eloquence of speech that the need to witness through word is strongly emphasised.

The voice of testimony stands as a beacon of truth, revealing the transformative power of our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Let’s delve into the significance of testimony, its inherent power, and its profound responsibility in our journey with Christ.

Testimony is not mere storytelling; it’s the declaration of God’s work in our lives, bearing witness to God’s faithfulness and grace. It means simply to “give evidence” of an event, person or thing. When giving evidence in court, we are asked to testify to the truth, be it a crime or a person’s sound or not-so-good character. The testimony given is open for discussion. If you have provided a written statement, you are asked to testify to the truth of what you have written. It opens the door for judgment of the good or bad of a situation. It helps others to be informed and come to know what it is that you have witnessed.

In the Pew Bulletin today, I will write about the types of witnessing. If you are summoned to court in Greece, you will receive the call to be a martyr. In English, our understanding of martyrdom is usually those whose lives have ended because of their belief. Some people have even taken their lives in the often misunderstood

commission that killing themselves and frequently others, witness is given to their belief. I do not believe in a God who calls us to end the lives of others to prove a point. One man gave his life for that, and today, we worship him in heaven, knowing that a new way, a better way exists to bring out the best in others.

Columba set in motion a dispute over the written word that cost the lives of 3000 people. The book of Psalms he copied was not so much the reason; it was the excuse given in a more than likely politically charged environment. Finian was a famous abbot who learned the most. Columba was gifted with excellent evangelism skills. Both of them lived 'outside the secular world' yet, Finian asked Diarmaid, the High King, to be judge over the dispute. What is often overlooked is that Columba also had a claim on Diarmaid's throne. The story, as related in the bulletin, is told as if a Celtic bard was telling you a story. And what a story it was.

Which brings us back to our own story of sharing the love of God. Telling of God's goodness is essential for all of us to do. You may not think you have the eloquence of Matthias to have the lot fall on you, but your story about God matters. One of the most remarkable testimonies in the Bible is the Song of Mary, or the Magnificat. In the song, Mary tells of the greatness of God and all the blessings that originate in her obedience and fiat, or saying, "Let it be so."

Jesus sees Nathaniel under a fig tree and tells him so. Nathaniel believes him because of that. Why was he under there? Was it a case where he needed to be found and a prayer was answered? We may never know, but that simple testimony allowed Jesus to tell Nathaniel much more about the love of God.

There is a danger of testimonies centring on self-righteousness or personal achievement rather than Jesus's redemptive work. Stories that are shared from the point of view of "I" and all the wealth or prosperity "I" received are inherently shallow. Believing in God does bring prosperity, but what is not intended as an outward display of wealth and to use a much over-hyped term from the USA is grifting. Believing in God will not turn my 10-year-old Suzuki into a Rolls Royce, no matter how hard I pray and believe. Prosperity is not about wealth; it is about living well.

In testifying, we must show humility, acknowledging our dependence on God's grace rather than our merit. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus cautions us against prideful testimonies and advocates for a posture of humility before God. The testimony or witness of the widow was not in how much she gave but what she gave. She gave her all for the love and service of God, and did so in a way not drawing attention to herself.

True Prosperity reminds believers of Jesus' teachings, which lie in spiritual blessings and the richness of His presence, not worldly possessions. In giving witness, we are asked to focus towards storing treasures in heaven rather than seeking temporal wealth on earth. Jesus' ministry among the marginalised and oppressed highlights his call to love and serve the least of these.

He condemned the hypocrisy of claiming a relationship with Jesus while neglecting the marginalised, urging believers to embody compassion and justice. We read in Matthew 25:31-46 how Jesus stresses the importance of actively demonstrating Jesus' presence in our lives through love and service to those in need.

Today's great prayer commissions all believers to boldly proclaim their faith, letting their lives be a living testimony to the power of Christ's love and redemption.

The gospel is a prayer of mission and confidence addressed to a community already under persecution. "They are in the world but not of the world."

McGowan expresses this:

Jesus prays for his disciples, but as they have become in him, a kind of divine presence whose love and authenticity will be an efficacious sign to the world—and which the world is likely to resist, or worse, precisely for that reason. The "consecration" to which he commits himself, and which he prays for them (or us), is not a cultic or ecclesial separation, a "holiness" that implies self-importance, but a life which shows itself—just as his holiness did—in the quality of love with which we live and pray. When he prays thus and we pray thus, the world becomes a different place; while we admit the depth of its brokenness—and our own—

we can also glimpse and live into the beauty and truth for which God intended it.

Today, we pray for God's guidance and empowerment to live as faithful witnesses, bearing testimony to His grace and mercy in all we do.

It calls on us to embrace the power and responsibility of testimony, rejecting self-centredness and materialism and instead embodying Jesus' love and compassion, particularly towards the marginalised. Let our lives be compelling testimony to the reality of our relationship with Jesus, who laid down his life for his friends, so that in taking it up again, we too may share in the life of the world to come. .

Pew Bulletin Article:

The Testimony of Red, Green and White.

There once was a gentle prince of Eire whose name was Colmcille. This name in the old Gaelic tongue meant "Dove of God." By the time he was 41, Colmcille had given his life to Jesus and established 41 monasteries, one for each year his age. Even though he had a claim to the throne of what is now the modern-day Sligo (northwest Ireland), Colmcille, whose professed name was Columba (of God), preferred the life of a "green martyr."

It was not until the reign of Elizabeth I of England that Ireland knew the horrors of a "red" martyr. A red martyr is one who gave witness by the shedding of blood. To give witness, the believer was prepared to die for their faith; in dying, they are made truly one in Christ. A green martyr was a witness who lived outside the jurisdiction of the secular world, often in small communities, devoted to scholarship, literature, and prayers.

Around 560, Columba was copying a book of Psalms in the scriptorium run by St Finian of Moville. Intending to keep the copy for himself, Finian objected and claimed that as it was a copy of his translation, Columba was only entitled to have a copy with permission or compensation. What followed was the first-ever battle for copyright, literally! Diarmait mac Cerbil, the last pagan Chief King of Ireland, ruled favouring Finian. What followed was a battle for the Book of Psalms.

Being held responsible for three thousand deaths, Columba and twelve of his relatives were exiled to Scotland and given the task of converting one person to Christianity for every life lost. Columba and crew landed on Iona, where the Abbey established by Columba is beautifully restored and functioning. As they sailed into the white light of morning, Columba viewed his exile as losing the 'green martyrdom' and gaining a 'white martyrdom.' On the mound overlooking the Abbey, Columba set out to continually rewrite the book of Psalms for others to share. The very reason for his exile became his life's work.

What sort of martyr are you? Red, green, or white? What would be your testimony?

Questions

According to the sermon, what is the importance of testimony in our Christian lives?

Context: The sermon explained that testimony is a declaration of God's work in our lives, bearing witness to His faithfulness and grace.

Application Question: How have you personally experienced God's faithfulness and grace?

How can we practice humility in our testimony, as discussed in the sermon?

Context: The sermon stresses that testimony should not be focused on personal achievements or self-righteousness but on God's grace and the transformative power of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Application Question: What is one area of your life where you must focus more on God's grace than your own merit?

Based on 1 John 5:9-13, what can we learn about the significance of witnessing God's testimony?

Context: The scripture passage emphasizes the importance of God's testimony and the witness of God's love in Christ Jesus.

Application Question: How can you better bear witness to God's testimony in your daily life?

As mentioned in the sermon, why is it important to focus on spiritual blessings and the richness of Christ's presence in our testimony?

Context: The sermon discussed that true prosperity lies in spiritual blessings and Christ's presence, and testimony should focus on embodying compassion and justice while ministering to the marginalised and oppressed.

Application Question: How can you shift your focus from worldly possessions to spiritual blessings and Christ's presence?

What are some practical ways to live a life that reflects the love of Christ, as urged in the sermon?

Context: The sermon encourages us to reject self-centeredness and materialism and instead embody Jesus' love and compassion for others.

Application Question: Choose one area of your life where you can actively demonstrate Jesus' love and compassion towards others.

Prayer Prompt:

- Ask for prayer requests from the group
- Pray for God's guidance to apply the sermon's message in our daily lives
- Pray for humility in our testimony, focusing on God's faithfulness rather than personal achievements
- Pray for the strength to embody Jesus' love and compassion, ministering to the marginalised and oppressed

