

Easter 1

I take as my text, from the 20th chapter of St. John's Gospel:

....when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.

Let the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Today's Epistle and Gospel passages, both from St. John, come together as a powerful witness to Jesus Christ:

First as an emphatic witness, divine and human, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; and

Second as an emphatic action of Jesus Christ in sending His Apostles to make witness of Himself throughout the world and to carry forth the witness to generations to come.

And third in establishing Apostolic Succession as a foundation for continuing the Church for all time as he breathed on them, breathing life into them, through his breath imbuing them, filling them with the Holy Spirit.

Now. Two millennia later, we are the inheritors of that witness, the continuation of the commission, for it is to us that the Apostles were sent. Our presence is assured through Apostolic Succession.

Whether clergy or laity, we who have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour have also accepted the witness and thus have become inheritors of the charge to bear that witness.

It is to a Risen Christ that we bear witness, not to an empty tomb.

Imagine at the Crucifixion, the days following, and throughout his appearances to his disciples.

At first, the hope and certainty that this is truly the Messiah is seemingly dashed as Jesus is nailed to the Cross, and his followers are dispersed in shock and despair.

Then, something momentous: the announcement that the tomb is empty and he has been seen.

First reaction is that this is just another disappointment, a rumor to give false hope.

But time after time, Jesus appears to all of his disciples and the reality takes hold; finally, with certainty, they are able to proclaim that Jesus Christ is risen.

They are witness to a reality: Jesus Christ is risen; he is alive.

Indeed, it is a *reality*: not an apparition; not a *ghost*; not hysteria. Jesus is tangible. He responds to them. They can touch him. He joins with them in eating.

Then, the Apostles receive the command to bear witness to that momentous event. Tell the world. That is what the Apostles are sent to do: to bring that witness to us that we may also witness to the Risen Christ.

And so we do, just as all the Disciples did. That is our calling — to witness.

Witness: how many times have we just heard that word? More importantly, when will we take it to heart and act upon it?

In the passage from his First General Epistle, John speaks of the triple witness: the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood. Here, he gives us a very, very powerful perspective of the concept of *witness* that was essential to the Church from its earliest beginnings.

First, the witness of the Spirit.

When our Lord was baptized, the Holy Spirit rested upon him; then, it was passed on to the Apostles, as we heard in today's Gospel when Jesus breathed on them and gave them their commission; and it was fully given on Pentecost.

Second, the witness of the Water.

The flowing waters from the moment Jesus was baptized to the water that flowed from his side on the cross, to the water of our own baptism wherein we die with Christ and are raised with him to a new life.

And third, the witness of the Blood:

When on the cross the Blood of Jesus was poured out to God in perfect sacrifice, the fulfilling sacrifice that enables us to be living sacrifices, as when we are joined with him in the Eucharist where we receive the Blood of Christ along with his Body in a continuing witness to the atoning power of his Sacrifice once offered.

The Spirit, the Water, and the Blood come together to form a triple witness to the perfect Messiahship, the perfect Sonship, and the perfect Saviourhood of Jesus Christ.

In breathing upon his Apostles, Christ passed to them the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to witness to the world the Truth that he had revealed to them. Indeed, this witness was given to the Church and to us.

To what do we witness?

We witness to the world the power and love of the Risen Christ. We witness to the Good News, the Gospel.

We witness to the hope of eternal life, not just an eternal existence, but an eternal life in every sense of the word: we will be raised up in spiritual bodies that house our souls and retain our individualities as children of God.

Witness here is active, a verb, an action, not passive as having been a witness to something. It is an action passed from the Apostles to the Church and to us as members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

We witness to the Good News; we proclaim it to the world. Indeed, it is our Christian duty.

How do we witness?

Each of us is called to witness in different ways.

We may witness by telling people about our own spiritual experience as a Christian; we may be called to preach; or write; even just being in his presence in the services of the Church.

But most often, we are called to witness through our lives, by how we live our lives; how we conduct ourselves; just by the way Christ shines forth from us as we reflect his Love and emulate his obedience to the Father.

What better witness than to reflect the joy that comes from accepting God's Grace and Love and letting it flow within us and through us, and act upon our hearts and drive our lives.

The Apostles were first-hand witnesses of the Risen Christ to which they witnessed to the world. They were the foundation of the Church which carries on this commission to witness to the world.

They were the commissioned leaders of the Church and the official agents of Christ, standing in his stead.

In the Church today, the bishop is the successor to the Apostles, carrying the full authority, within the Church, that Christ gave to the Apostles themselves. It is through this Apostolic Succession that the Church's authority flows.

For us in the continuum of the Anglican Church, the Church Catholic, there is no doubt as to the intention of Jesus recorded by St. John that the Apostles were commissioned by our Lord to be his agents, to stand in his stead, empowered to administer the Sacraments of the Church, to preach, teach, baptize, and to maintain moral discipline as well as absolution.

As members of the Church, we too have a responsibility. Our task is to continue to witness to what we have received: he is risen; our Saviour liveth; Jesus Christ is Lord.

That is our witness, our obligation, not passive but active.

Jesus Christ lives through the Church; he lives in us.

St. John, the beloved Apostle, never ceased in that witness. He bridged the first and second centuries — the last of the Apostles — that we may have his first-hand testimony to the risen Christ and the Promise of eternal life.

Now, it is our turn to continue that witness, each of us, each of you, by virtue of our very presence before the Altar of God — each of us must answer what is our commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; what is our commitment in witness to the Resurrected Christ; how much of ourselves are we willing to give in return to what Christ gave to us on the Cross?

The witness of the water and the witness of the Blood — and the witness of the Spirit— those three are irrefutable to which we, too, bear witness.

The world today, our nation, is in desperate need of our witness, and we are each called in our own special way, making the best use of our own individual abilities, in whatever capacity to witness to Christ, witness to the Resurrected Son of God — witness to the Divine Love and Saving Grace of God through his Son, Jesus Christ.