

08 May 2022, The 4th Sunday of Easter: Revelation 7:9-17

What was it like to be a Christian in the Roman Empire? You would be considered eccentric, by many insane. Yet this is not the origin of persecution; if Roman Law was followed and military control prevailed, eccentric groups were tolerated. Christians might have been just another herd of oddballs, but they were not.

During persecutions Christians were charged with two crimes. One was atheism. This seems strange, since Christians professed belief in a divine being. Romans were content for people to worship whatever gods they wanted, so long as they worshiped the cult of the divine emperor. Acknowledge the emperor's divinity and you could be as loopy as you like. Jews were exempted, as a special case; but as more Gentiles came into the Church, the more the state reacted against the Church with persecution.

A second crime was treason, if you were a Roman citizen, sedition, if you were not. Why treason or sedition? Christians tended to lead quiet lives. They prayed, worshipped, gave tithes to the Church and alms to the poor; cared for the sick and dying, widows and orphans; abandoned and disposal children; the elderly and lonely; they welcomed all, practiced radical hospitality and equality; they paid taxes, were obedient to the state except when it compromised their faith, and that was the trouble. They saw themselves as subjects of a divine kingdom, a higher authority. Faith in Jesus defined their lives in all circumstances and environments, all their relationships and loyalties. They endured even torture and death because Jesus was the center of their lives.

From today's second reading: *These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.* We call them martyrs; the word simply means 'witness.' It was first used in Acts, referring to those who were witnesses of Christ's life and resurrection. We assume martyrs die violently. The Celtic Christians of Ireland, Scotland and northern Britain preserved more of the word's original meaning. There are different kinds of martyrdom: giving one's mortal life, but living the monastic life, a missionary life; those who sacrificed comfort, family, home, and friends for the sake of the Gospel were also considered martyrs; even the ordinary life of Christians living the Gospel in their home, community and Church, whose lives are truly sacrificial, are martyrs, their daily lives a testimony to Christ. Anyone for whom Jesus is the defining wellspring of life, whether in Imperial Rome or the mind-numbing, soul-dumbing hedonism of today, is a living witness. Martyrs are those for whom Jesus Christ holds the ultimate claim at the expense of all other authority, power, and demand.

Through the cross, Christ conquers. Jesus saves not through power but through self-offering love and sacrifice. We are to live as imitators of Christ. Through Christian virtue—learned and practiced in the Church, shared extravagantly with the world—we witness through sacrifice. We are not detached from a world that demands if not our allegiance at least our submission; we are witnesses in the world, where it is most needed.

A principle from the 12 Step movement applies to the Church, it is called Tradition 11: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion" (AA Big Book, page 562). The Christian Church has been busy the last 50 years with self-promotion—stealing marketing strategies from secular culture to fix declining membership, sagging budgets, and waning influence. Sometimes self-promotion appears successful. Yet even mega-churches show ominous signs that adopting cultural values to promote Christianity has limited effect. This is because the Church's vocation is attraction, not promotion. Attraction is always personal; it is about welcoming others into one's life and wanting to be welcomed into theirs. Attraction is knowing what is most important and sharing it with gentle single-mindedness in simple, practical ways. Attraction is offering something valuable in ways that the other may receive. Attraction is hospitality: it is about the other and what is offered, not about you and me. Witnesses point beyond themselves to Jesus. Jesus is the message and the method. Congregations grow as we together share with anyone and everyone the hope of forgiveness, the joy of salvation, the wonder of God's beauty, and the fellowship of the redeemed. As witnesses we *must* share what we have, since in God's economy we only possess what we give away. If we are being saved, we yearn to share Christ's salvation; if we know the joy of membership in Christ's Body, we will do what it takes for others to know such joy. In this way we, too, are martyrs for Jesus' sake.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.