

Fortnight for Freedom Opening Mass

“We’re All in the Same Boat”

At one time or another, we might repeat the old phrase, *“We’re all in the same boat.”* By that we mean to say we belong to a group that shares common problems or even a common plight. For example, at a 50th class reunion, we might look around and say to a classmate, “I know I look older & I’ve gained a few pounds, but hey, we’re all in the same boat.”

On the Sea of Galilee

Well, that’s where we find Jesus and the Apostles this morning: in a boat. The Apostles were seasoned commercial fishermen but the Sea of Galilee which they were crossing can be tricky; it is subject to sudden and violent squalls. As waves came crashing over the side of their boat, the Apostles were afraid that it would sink and that they would drown. Meanwhile Jesus slept peacefully on a cushion in the stern, much like that airline passenger next to us who keeps on sleeping while the plane is being shaken by turbulence; we call it, “the sleep of the just”. The Apostles, of course, didn’t see it that way. They awakened Jesus and rebuked him for seeming not to care about the danger they were in, thus showing that their faith was still undeveloped. They did not yet recognize that the Teacher, asleep in the stern of the boat, was the very One who had addressed Job from out of a storm. The dangers were very real but the Apostles were in the very best of hands.

The Turbulent Waters of History

In this Gospel passage, the boat is more than a boat. The vessel bearing the terrified Apostles & the tranquil Savior symbolizes the Church. The stormy sea that brought Jesus and the Apostles ‘to the other shore’ – that is to say, to new missionary territory – that stormy sea symbolizes the challenges of the Church’s voyage through history, beginning with its journey through the vast Roman Empire.

As we look at the passenger manifest of this 2,000 year old voyage, whom do we see? Don’t we see those early Christians who encountered such stiff headwinds as they courageously bore witness to the faith amid persecution – Peter and Paul,

Stephen, Lawrence, Agnes, Cecilia, to name a few? Glancing again at the manifest, we realize that among our fellow passengers are great missionaries who bore witness to the faith even to the ends of the earth: St. Francis Xavier, the martyrs of Uganda, and Vietnam, again to name a few. Looking again, we recognize the name of St. Thomas More, the 16th century lay Chancellor of England and Councillor to Henry VIII who ended up surrendering his life rather than compromising his faith. With him, is St. John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, and so many English and Irish martyrs who laid down their lives at the Tyburn gallows. And at our end of the boat are those twenty-one Coptic Christians who just recently were lined up and beheaded while the cameras kept rolling. Surveying religious persecution in the world today, Pope Francis said this: "Nowadays, persecution against Christians is stronger than it was in the first centuries of the Church and there are more Christian martyrs than in that time" (June 20, 2014).

Still in the Same Boat?

On this day when we begin the Fortnight for Freedom, here's the question: Do we regard ourselves as being in the same boat as Christ and his martyrs? Or have we managed to find a comfortable spot on an otherwise turbulent ship? Are we tempted to book passage on vessels other than the barque of Peter, on which we might ride out the storms of time with relative ease - comfortable ships in which we are urged to tone down our faith, to confine it to the little chapel located somewhere between the aft and the stern, and not to let that faith interfere too much with everyday life.

In the order of magnitude, challenges to religious liberty in the United States do not compare with the outright persecution experienced by many of our sisters & brothers in places like Syria, Libya, Iran, & Iraq. Yet, whether we like it or not, we are in fact in the same boat with those courageous believers. These brave men and women have been dispossessed, exiled, and killed because of their beliefs - whether they are Christians or Muslims deemed not Muslim enough. They are the ones who teach us about God's precious gift of religious freedom. No matter how great the threat to life and property these believers exercise that God-given freedom which no tyrant can eradicate - the freedom to bear witness to one's faith even at the cost of one's life. What solidarity we should have with these believers. We should be inspired by their courage and renewed in our resolve not to let religious freedom in our country be compromised by degrees until it all but disappears from our society.

Religious freedom is our first and most important freedom because it pertains to our most fundamental relationship, our relationship with God. The First Amendment recognizes & protects religious freedom but does not grant it; it is God's gift inscribed on the heart of every person, essential to human dignity. Yet today many intolerant voices try to stifle religious freedom by labelling as bigotry long-held beliefs about the sanctity of life and marriage, by imposing a grey and godless secularism even on religious institutions, and by branding basic religious liberty protections as "a license to discriminate". Increasingly religious institutions in the United States are in danger of losing their freedom to hire for mission and their freedom to defend the family. Also endangered is the freedom of church ministries to provide employee benefits and to provide adoptions and refugee services in accord with the Church's teaching on faith and morals. It is one thing for others to disagree with the Church's teaching but quite another to discriminate against the rights of believers to practice our faith, not just in word but in the way we conduct our daily life, ministry, and business. And, if ever there were a moment that demonstrated the tremendous value and the urgent need of the religious community's service of the common good, it was this past spring, during the unrest that beset our beloved city of Baltimore. We seek the freedom to bear witness to Christ's love, not just in church but in our service to the wider community through works of justice and charity, education, social services, and health care.

Awakening the Christ within Us

As we enter upon uncharted waters, we do not need to awaken Christ, the steersman of his ship, the Church, but we do need to awaken the Christ who is within us. Christ is asleep in us to the degree that we have forgotten him. Let us rouse him by a strong and active faith that links us to those who have exercised their sovereign freedom by bearing witness to Christ and to the faith by laying down their lives. Better, let us allow Christ to awaken our faith and to stir us into action so that we may preserve, protect, and defend our God-given freedom to bear him witness...may God bless us and keep us always in his love!