

**Episcopal Centennial, 2010, 7th Sunday of Easter, (Sunday after the Ascension)
Lubbock, Texas, Preacher: The Rev. David L. Veal**

“You will be my witnesses...”

These are the Resurrected Lord’s last words to his apostles before he returned to the dimension whence he had come. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” It is not always clear to the English-speaking reader that Jesus was speaking in the imperative. He was not suggesting or predicting, he was commanding. A more accurate Southern translation might be, “Listen hear, you go and be my witnesses.” Soon, as Jesus had promised, the apostles were given their voices by God’s Holy Spirit and they went forth to Greece and Rome, Egypt and Persia, witnessing to the Good News of the presence and love of God, taking a clear message of truth and hope and peace to a world that was up to its armpits in religion and philosophy, in money-making and government, but quite bereft of the peace that passes understanding, desperately struggling to find the God who was already there but quite unknown, the God who is love. The first century world was a kaleidoscope of competing sects, with many gods and goddesses, cults characterized by fear of the future, superstition, and exclusive claims to secret knowledge and magic powers. The idea of one supreme god for all people was not totally foreign to them, but almost none got beyond the concept of Zeus, Jupiter, or Thor: the heavenly humanoid father-god who reigned in the heavens and hurled thunderbolts at those who ticked him off... who had no ethics and cared nothing of how we treated one another... only of how we treated him... that is with all the loud praise, glory, and adoration an egotistical father expects. With the right prayers and sacrifices he could be swayed. No better were those who worshipped the great goddess of mother earth, who nurtured dependency, who could be flattered or bribed, but who ultimately smothered her children..

On the last evening that Jesus spent with his disciples in Jerusalem he blessed and broke bread and blessed and poured wine and all shared the broken bread and common cup. He commanded his followers to do this as a way of remembering him and finding assurance that he was still present with them and not just in an imaginary way. On that same night he washed the disciples feet and gave us one great new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us. He didn’t command us to always be right or to be sure to hold pure doctrine. He never said we had to always agree with one another or all behave in the same way. He didn’t suggest that we would be popular or loved. He never even suggested that we should be successful, on the contrary, he said that if we did his will we would be despised and rejected as he was. He promised that we would be hated and ridiculed by pious and powerful people. He commanded us to be his witnesses and to love others as he loves us, without any promise that we would be loved in return by them. He commanded the apostles to go out into the world, to baptize, to proclaim God’s love for all the world, and to love one another and in so doing we would find God and peace and eternal life... and we could be his witnesses – parts of his own Body – and participants in the redemption and renewal of the world.

The first century world was ruled by greed and pride. Unrestrained, the rich and powerful were free to exploit and abuse the poor and weak. All governments were, in fact plutocracies, owned and operated by the very wealthy and the very powerful.

Nowhere in the Roman or Persian empires was there any way the common people could assert their interests or claim their rightful portion of the earth's bounty.

Into this world of greed, dogma, superstition, and lust for power over others, came the witnesses to the faith of Jesus. They repudiated the gods and idols of the day and proclaimed one, universal God who was neither a big grandfather in the sky nor a controlling mother, but the very spirit of life and being, creator of all and accessible to all, indeed, both the Lord and Giver of all life, who was intimately knowable to all people in their heart of hearts... who loved and cared about every soul and every creature... and sought nothing less than the freedom of each precious soul to become a unique and special being. For such teaching the apostles and their successors were thrown to the lions in the arena or crucified as atheists – as those who rejected the gods and all institutionalized religiosity.

Into the first century world of greed, dogma, injustice, and lust for power over others came the witnesses to the faith of Jesus, telling an amazing story that the One Eternal Spirit, the God of the universe, came to us as a human being, taking upon himself all the limitations of being a human person, a mortal who would live, suffer, and die an ignominious death. These witnesses taught that this very human person, Jesus, was God with us... "Emmanuel"... and that he became as we are and made us to understand what true life, eternal life, is and to empower us to become the kind of whole and special person that Jesus was. He became as we are in order that we might become as he is. They proclaimed "Jesus is Lord, Elohim, true God of true God, of one being with the eternal One. As Jesus was one of us and also God, so we might become at one with God, when our lives are baptized into his Spirit and lived consciously in his presence and according to his will..

Into that first century world of greed, dogma, superstition, and lust for power over others, came the witnesses to the faith of Jesus. Some among them had wealth and they freely and gladly shared all of what they had with the poor and hungry, breaking the eucharistic bread with glad and generous hearts, giving thanks to God for the ability to share God's love and grace with all. These witnesses to the faith of Jesus embraced with compassion abandoned and neglected children and started the world's first orphanages. They cared for the sick and dying and started the first free public hospitals in history. They protested the brutality of the gladiatorial bouts and the violent militarism of the oppressive Roman government. For these and other acts of mercy and peace, those early witnesses to the faith of Jesus were regarded as fools and treated with great contempt. Their eyes were on God and on the eternal dimension and they chose to live their lives as if they were participating in that eternal drama. In their words the kingdom of God was their home, now and forever. These were our forebears, our ancestors. They were mistakenly seen as holding life in this world in contempt and focusing only on the world to come. Nothing could have been further from the truth. They saw life in this world as the beginning of an eternal life with God and they sought to transform the lives of people in this world into the kingdom of God. They prayed as Jesus had taught them, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." They sought the reign of the God of love in this world now and in the next. And they overcame the most powerful state in history up until that time, the mighty Roman Empire. They conquered not through violence or loud public preaching, but through deeds of love and mercy, through ceaseless prayer and the practice of the presence of God in their lives. Sadly,

their victory over Rome was short lived and quickly undermined by greedy and violent men who claimed to be Christians and defenders of God. What could be more absurd: that God should need to be defended. It was then that we discovered that the powers of evil and darkness must be faced anew in each generation and every life in every time must be baptized, nourished with Word and Sacrament, converted and nurtured in the love of God and humankind and liberated from greed, superstition, and vain religiosity. Every person and every society must learn over and over in each generation how not to be overcome by evil, but how to overcome evil with good.

Roughly a century ago some of the heirs of the early Christians, some apostolic Christians, arrived on the scene in Lubbock, Texas. Episcopalians were among them. The continuing apostolic tradition was nearly nineteen hundred years old by the time it reached Lubbock. Much water had gone under the bridge and by the time this family got to Lubbock we had accumulated a long, long, history of experiences, good and bad, as the holy church of God engaged God's broken and hurting world, a world obsessed by greed, dogma, superstition, and lust for power over others. We had experienced every kind of failure and success imaginable. We carried in our luggage the experience and wisdom of countless saints and sinners, for the church of Jesus Christ is not an assembly of people who believe all the same precise things... we are not a sect or a political party united by a platform... we are not a state or a social club... we are not a secret society that possesses magical powers... we are not an international conspiracy with an infallible *furor* for our leader... we are a family: a family that trusts God, has faith and confidence in the One living God and in Jesus Christ who has made God known to us. We have countless opinions and we behave in many different ways as we try to live into our faith in the God who is love, the One true God to whom we are called to be witnesses. But, we are a family. Of course we have differences of opinion, like all brothers and sisters. That has been true from the earliest days of the Church. Of course we have winners and losers from time to time. We did not choose this family. We were born into it. It is apostolic, that is "given" and "received" – not conceived by us, but like all families it is given to us.

We are born into this family in baptism and we share a common meal at our Father's board. Our concerns are for the spiritual nourishment of souls and the comfort and health of human flesh, for the healing of hostile divisions and the conversion of pride and lust into grace and mercy. And out of these concerns emerges our witness to the living God, to the crucified and risen Lord whom we know to be our friend and savior. So we are his witnesses even to this day. By the grace of God, we are three congregations of Christ's church here in Lubbock today. Our Lord's charge today to us is the same as it was some two thousand years ago: Baptize, share the Lord's table, teach God's love for every soul, and love others as you love yourself, and so be Christ's witnesses. That's all. So simple. So sweet. So powerful. So desperately needed in this city today.