

“Jesus, Our Forever Friend”

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by Fr. Terry Loughran

Those who assume that the followers of Jesus would be respected, honored and followed, that power and recognition, that policy and influence would be there lot, would find very little comfort in today’s readings. Christianity is not a religion for those that seek recognition, success or power. Today’s gospel passage from Mark is about how people in Jesus’ hometown misunderstood and rejected him, leaving him to apply an already familiar proverb to a new subject: “No prophet is without honor except in his own country.”

The first reading tells us that rejection and persecution were the fate of most of the Old Testament prophets, including Ezekiel. In the second reading, Paul admits the fact that, in spite of the revelation that was given to him by God, that God has given him a share in Christ’s suffering so that he may glory in God’s power and grace. There is a story about a bishop who was interviewing a senior seminarian for his ordination. Now, just for the sake of the story, we’ll call the senior seminarian “Aidan.” ... (A voice from Fr. Aidan, on the altar, proclaims, “I’ll get you back for that!”) ... As they say in all the best movies, any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.... But, anyway, the bishop asked the deacon where he would like to be assigned as deacon for his pastoral training. Aidan answered somewhat boldly, “Oh, my Lord Bishop, anywhere but Banbridge.” ... “Why not there,” asked the bishop. “You know,” answered the seminarian, “Banbridge is my home town. And we all know that a prophet is never without honor except in his own town.” The bishop ended the interview with the remark, “Don’t worry, my friend, no one in your hometown is going to confuse you with a prophet.”

John Quincy Adams who was the sixth president of the United States and the son of a former president, reportedly said that he would rather clean filth from the streets than to be president. Scripture tells us that most of the prophets shared John Quincy Adams hesitation about their callings, probably for fear of rejection or failure. Moses tried to convince God that he didn’t speak well enough. Jeremiah complains that he was too young. The prophets trembled at the trials ahead of them, and with good reason. Israel had a long history of rejecting prophets. Jeremiah was threatened with death several times, thrown into a cistern, imprisoned, dragged off to exile in Egypt, and perhaps most painful of all, forced to watch the destruction of Jerusalem because its inhabitants would not listen to his message. At least twice in his lifetime, the prophet Elijah spoke the truth of God to King Ahab concerning his promotion of idolatry and, as a result, he was forced to flee into the wilderness where he suffered greatly.

Today’s gospel is another example why the prophets don’t jump for joy at their career prospects.

In the space of five short verses, we see the people of Nazareth turn from amazement to fury at Jesus' words, dragging him off to the clifftop to murder him. Speaking God's truth by word and deed is a risky business, even in today's world. More than six hundred missionaries have been martyred since 1990. In addition, hundreds of Christians have been killed this past year in Indonesia, the Philippines, Egypt, the Sudan. In this country, the attack has not been so much physical as psychological, with various forms of media ridiculing and insulting Christians.

It was not true that Jesus should visit his hometown of Nazareth with his disciples. We are told on the Sabbath Day, he went to the synagogue. Now, in the synagogue, there was no definite person to give the address. Any distinguished visitor who had a message to give might be asked by the ruler of the synagogue to speak. Since Jesus' fame as a preacher and miracle-worker in other parts of Galilee had reached Nazareth, he was invited to read from the prophets and to explain the text. During his inaugural address or his mission statement, Jesus takes upon himself the identity of a prophet, very different from the image of the miracle-worker that people wished to see. The prophets of Israel used to call people to accountability for their selfishness, their faithlessness in God, their lack of justice and mercy and for their sinfulness. Jesus did the same, as explained in more detail in Luke's gospel. Consequently, the first reaction of the people in the synagogue to Jesus' words was one of astonishment. Luke says, "They were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." And Mark tells us that they asked one another, "Where did this man get all this?" They knew him only as a carpenter from a poor family with no formal training in the law. Certainly, they thought that he had gone far beyond what one of his status should do as a humble carpenter.

One of the dreams of Martin Luther King was that people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. The people of Nazareth didn't expect Jesus, a mere tradesman, to be skilled in the interpretation of the scriptures. His listeners could not understand how he could be their political messiah who would liberate them from Roman rule and re-establish the Davidic Kingdom of power and glory. Local people also objected that Jesus had no distinguished lineage. He's identified as the son of Mary, rather than by the traditional "bar Joseph," son of Joseph title. Such a reference would be seen as an insult because in that culture men were identified by who their fathers were. Jesus' response: "No prophet is accepted in his native place."

Those who accept the call of God and seek to follow him may face indifference and hostility, contempt and scorn, hardship, persecution, trials and rejection. The story of Jesus' rejection in his hometown is a story that we all identify with because it is a story that possibly happens to most of us. We might have experienced the pain of rejection caused by hurts, wounds, betrayal, divorce, abandonment, neglect, or abuse. What about rejection from those closest to us? Often our own friends, families or childhood companions fail to listen to wisdom and refuse to accept the words of grace, love and encouragement that we offer them because they are too familiar with us. Hence, they are unable to see us as God's appointed instruments, the agents of God's healing and saving grace. We also need to check the other side of the coin. How often do we discount people through prejudice? How often do we fail to see God's image in them

because of our own hard-heartedness? God is present, giving us his message through our nearest and dearest, our neighbors and our co-workers. Since God uses them as his prophets to convey his message to us, it is our duty to acknowledge and indeed to honor them. So, express your appreciation today for the person you married, for children, for parents. A word of appreciation for the person who cooks the dinner, the neighbor who is always ready to share your happiness and your sorrow, and for the friends who gave you time, support and attention during a recent bereavement or a tragedy in your life. Let us not take for granted the presence of God among us, as evidenced by the goodness shown by family and friends.

Of course, rejection comes in all shapes and forms, even in the next life. There is a story about the cab driver who had reached the pearly gates of heaven. He announced his presence to St. Peter who looked him up in the Big Book. After reading the entry for the cabbie, St. Peter invites him to grab a silk robe and a golden staff and to proceed into heaven. A preacher is next in line, behind the cabbie. And he has been watching the proceedings with interest. He announces himself to St. Peter, and, after looking up the preacher's entry in the Big Book, St. Peter furrows his brow and says, "OK. We'll let you in, but take that cotton robe and that wooden staff." The preacher is astonished and replies, "But I am a man of the cloth. You gave that cabbie a gold staff and a silk robe. Surely, I rate higher than a cabbie." St. Peter responded, matter of factly, "Here we are interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cabbie drove his taxi, people prayed."

If we're to be effective witnesses for Christ in today's world, we must not be afraid to speak the truth and allow Jesus to be our companion and our friend on the road of life. I'd just like to finish with a short reflection piece that I think sums up our need for Christ in our lives as our companion and as our friend.

Father sings the following, as he plays the guitar in accompaniment:

Everybody needs a little help sometimes. No one stands alone.
Makes no difference if you're just a child like me, or a king upon a throne.
For there are no exceptions. We all stand in line.
Everybody needs a friend. Let me tell you of mine.
He's my forever friend, my leave-me-never friend,
From darkest night to rainbow's end, he's my forever friend.
Even when I turn away, he cares for me.
His love no one can shake.
Even as I walk away, he's by my side, with every breath I take.
And sometimes I forget him. My halo fails to shine.
Sometimes, I'm not his friend. He is always mine.
He's my forever friend, my leave-me-never friend.
From darkest night to rainbow's end, he's my forever friend.
If you still don't know the one I'm talking of

I think it's time you knew.

Long ago and far away upon a cross, my friend died for you.

So, if you'd like to meet him and don't know what to do,

Ask my friend into your heart. He'll be your friend too.

He's my forever friend, my leave-me-never friend

From darkest night to rainbow's end, he's my forever friend.

He's my forever friend.

(Resounding applause follows!)