

told to shut up about Jesus, aren't they? In this country, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has often been used as a cudgel to prevent Christian witness in many areas, in the name of respect for those who don't know Jesus and who don't want anyone else to know Him, either. Whole generations have grown to adulthood in the belief that since everyone has the right to choose religion for themselves, we shouldn't be introducing young people to the faith, until they are old enough to choose for themselves. But again, let me ask you: How will you know if you want to learn about Jesus if you've never been taught anything about Him?

Peter, Paul and others felt that the Gospel message of God's love for the world, and of salvation in Christ, was so urgent, they could not, and would not, keep quiet about it. The result was that faith in Jesus grew by leaps and bounds, sometimes with thousands being won over to Christ with a single sermon. The Church mushroomed and began spreading to the uttermost corners of the earth.

Today, in this country, Christians are something of a remnant community, with many of us huddled for worship behind closed doors, but otherwise not comfortable about sharing our faith beyond the walls of the Church. Yet it is precisely because we are reticent about the faith that our churches are shrinking.

I believe we need to reverse this trend. Do you believe in Jesus? Then say so. Do you know Him personally? Introduce someone else to Him. The world is full of broken, hurting people, people who need Jesus just as surely as we need air to breathe. A simple word from you personally could change their lives forever. Something to think about...

Χάρις τῷ θεῷ, εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. Ἀμήν

Lectio: Acts 17.22-31; Psalm 66.7-18; 1 Peter 3.13-22; +John 14.15-21

Last Sunday, I spoke at length about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and about His instruction to us that no one comes to the Father except through Him. And I explored some of the reasons why Jesus could make such an assertion, including the fact that He Himself is God and that He perfectly reveals the nature and the will of God the Father. That led some of you to speak with me after the service and to ask how all this applies to the myriads who don't follow Jesus today, and all those who lived in this world prior to the birth of our Lord. Part of the answer is that people are judged by the light they have received. If they have had no chance to hear about Jesus, they will be judged accordingly. But after some two thousand years of witnessing about Jesus among all the nations of the earth, most people will have heard His name, and many will have heard something about Him. Consider the other two great monotheistic religions: both know of Jesus and both reject Him as Messiah or Son of God. Those are theological choices which bear the responsibility of huge consequences.

S. Paul, preaching in front of the Areopagus, spoke to a people who were habitually surrounded by the many gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon. And he pointed out something very interesting: despite knowing the names of all their deities, they still had shrines to an unknown god. It was as though they were trying to cut their losses by worshipping all the gods they knew, while still admitting that there might be someone out there whom they did not know. And Paul waded right in to the debate. He said several things: (i) What you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you as the Creator of the world; (ii) You don't need to carve statues to remind you of this God, because He lives; (iii) We have a relationship with Him as His offspring; and finally (iv) *While God has overlooked the*

*times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. [Acts 17.30-31]*

I believe this answers very clearly the question about whether all people need to come to Jesus if they expect or hope to see the Father. More importantly, Paul believed that once Jesus was revealed to the world, the world would both need and want to come to Him. This is what the Bible teaches. It's why you and I are here today. Because God so loved the world, He sent His only-begotten Son so that *all* who believe on Him would not die but have eternal life. God so loved you and me that Jesus came into the world to save us from our sin and to give us the promise of eternal life. But as always, we have a choice, don't we? We can accept the Father's invitation to life in Jesus, or we can reject it. Everyone else on earth has the same choice as we do. They can choose life in Christ or they can try to get along without Him. If they come to Christ, then the promises of God will be fulfilled in them, *but...* if they choose not to come to Christ, then they are rejecting the will of the Father, who sent Jesus into the world to gather all to Him. Jesus actually says this: *Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father in heaven. [+ Mt 10.32-33]*

We all have the same choices. God loves us enough to allow that, despite the dangerous consequences that might ensue.

The early Church was filled with people who either had seen Jesus' earthly ministry themselves, or who had heard about Him from those who had direct experiences of Him. Despite the best efforts of many different interest groups at that time, it simply was not possible to suppress the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus lives and that He has the power to offer life to

anyone who comes to Him. By sending Jesus into the world, God effectively provided a reset button in the lives of His people. This means that anyone who is a sinner, anyone whose life has become a torment, anyone who has the burdens of guilt and pain and uncertainty can offer all their negatives to the Lord in exchange for hope in eternal life and the peace that passes all understanding.

It was this new hope, which still brings about such joy and transformation in people's lives that caused the Church to grow and flourish. Even intense persecution, torture and death could not quell the joy of knowing Jesus as personal saviour. To a certain extent it no longer mattered what befell people in this life, because they had the unassailable certainty of eternal life in the nearer Presence of Jesus. S. Peter wrote about this: *Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, he said, yet do it with gentleness and reverence. [1 Peter 3:15-16]* In other words, treat others with such respect and dignity that, through you, they can experience the love of God. Don't do anything to blur or hide the reality that you have been saved through Jesus Christ, because you could be an instrument that the Lord uses to win souls for Christ.

That was the message of the Scriptures in the first century, and it remains the timeless message of the Bible today. Christians are mandated through God's written Word, to keep their faith in Jesus Christ and to share it as well. We are *mandated* to be able, with all gentleness and due respect, to tell others what we believe and why. And here's another thought: how often were Peter and Paul and other disciples told by the authorities *not* to proclaim Jesus as the Christ? Read the Acts of the Apostles and you'll quickly learn just how much opposition there was to the message of Salvation.

Has anything changed over the years? People are still being