

Homily based on the readings from April 30, 2025 (Acts 5.17-26; John 3.16-21)

As I am sure you all know, we are still very early in the Easter season. Easter Sunday was just ten days ago, and we still have almost forty days until Pentecost. Nevertheless, the focus of the readings at Mass has shifted dramatically. Even though it feels like Christ *just* rose from the dead, we are already deep into the missionary work of the early Church. What we see *today*, in particular, is the first real example of an *aspect* of Christian life that we are often hesitant to discuss – the *persecution* of the faithful. Today's first reading speaks about arrest of the Apostles – although, in this case, their incarceration proves to be short-lived. Over the next several days, we will hear about a series of attacks against the Christian community, culminating with the martyrdom of Saint Stephen.

If we were not already familiar with these events, we might find this situation difficult to understand. Why are *so* many people *so* angry with the Apostles? If people dislike their message, why not just ignore it?

What harm could these preachers possibly do? Unfortunately, this kind of rational response is exceptionally *rare* when individuals are confronted with the *truth*. Most people *know*, deep within their hearts, when they are doing something that is wrong – even if they would *never* admit it, even to themselves. Whenever they encounter somebody who is giving witness to a truth they would prefer to avoid, the typical response is to lash out – sometimes violently. The Apostles are not being persecuted because they are saying something *controversial*, but because they are speaking the *truth*.

Today's Gospel reading makes this point explicitly:

And this is the verdict,
that the light came into the world,
but people preferred darkness to light,
because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light

and does not come toward the light,
so that his works might not be exposed.

There is an important passage in the Acts of the Apostles, which we will hear twice at Mass over the coming week – once on Friday and once on Sunday. There is one line that particularly stands out: after they had been flogged and admonished, the Apostles went away “rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.” *Rejoicing*. One can imagine *enduring* hardship, and maybe even torture, on account of the Gospel – but *rejoicing*? Nevertheless, that is exactly the attitude that all of us, as Christians, are expected to adopt.

There is an anonymous epistle from the second century, that I have really come to love, which beautifully describes both the hardships and the joys of the Christian life:

Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally

destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do, they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. ... As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian's lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself.

In other words, persecution in the name of Christ is not an anomaly, not a distraction, but the *way* Christians give witness to the truth. Whatever suffering and dishonor we are expected to endure, let us pray that all of us have the courage, the strength, and the faith to do so with *rejoicing*.