

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 8:5-8, 14-17
<i>Response</i>	Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 3:15-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 14:15-21

The sixth Sunday of Easter for Year A continues the church's journey through the wonderful and beautiful First Letter of Peter. And now on this Sunday we come to the third chapter of this letter to a very famous passage regarding what would later go on to be known as apologetics, which is the practice of explaining and defending the reasons for faith. So let's see what Peter has to say about this in 1 Peter 3:15-18. It says this:

...in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit...¹

All right. If you recall, the First Letter of Peter is written to churches in Asia Minor, which appear to be churches consisting primarily of Jewish Christian believers who are suffering persecution, who are suffering opposition. And so a lot

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

of the letter has to deal with the question of suffering and persecution. Some of the most profound reflections on suffering and persecution come from First Peter. But in the chapter for today, in the reading for today's lectionary, what we see is that another aspect of living in a time where the church and the faith are being opposed or persecuted has to do with readiness or being prepared to explain the faith to those who might oppose it or who might attack it, or to explain the church to those who would want to persecute it, as a method of evangelization. And so here First Peter says that his readers, which includes not just that first century group but us as well, should “always be prepared to make an *apologia*”, in Greek a defense, “to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.”

Now, the Greek word *apologia* comes over into English as the word apology, which in our contemporary context tends to be used primarily to refer to giving an explanation for something that you've done wrong in the context of repentance and asking for forgiveness. So if I've hurt someone in my life, I will apologize to them, which normally means I'm going to say I'm sorry. That's not the primary connotation of *apologia* in Greek. And *apologia*, you can hear the root word logos in there, which can mean word or reason, is a reasoned defense or a reasoned explanation for some position or some belief or some practice that is otherwise controversial or being disputed. So here Peter is clearly giving an exhortation to be prepared to make an apologetical explanation, not an apology in the sense of asking for forgiveness, but rather a reasoned explanation “for the hope that is in you”, meaning for your hope as a Christian.

And so this is going to become the locus classicus, the classic place, the classic text in sacred scripture for the foundation of what would go on to be known as the art of apologetics, which has to do with giving reasoned explanations, using reason and argumentation to explain why Christians believe what we believe and why we do what we do. One of the most ancient examples of this is of course one of my favorite saints, St. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century AD. He was one of what are known by scholars as the early apologists because he wrote two classic works, one called *The First Apology*, which is not him asking for forgiveness for being a Christian, but it's an explanation of Christianity to Greek critics, to Gentile or pagan critics of Christianity. And then he wrote another book called the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, which is an explanation of Christianity to Jewish

critics of Christianity. So he was very much invested, Justin Martyr was, in explaining and defending the Christian faith on all fronts.

So I actually like to recommend to my students, if you want to get a sense for what classic apologetics looks like, and if you want to start reading the Church Fathers, but you might find, say, the heavily philosophical writings of some, a figure like Augustine, a little daunting, don't start with Augustine's *On the Trinity*, for example. I often encourage them to start with St. Justin Martyr's *First Apology* or with his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Because what Justin will do is give very biblical and rational explanations for the differences between Christianity and other religions and as well as the differences between Christianity and Judaism based on the Bible. And they're very clear and easy to read and kind of opens that window of the early church to you. So Justin, I've already gotten ahead of myself here to the Living Tradition, but Justin Martyr is basically a kind of living example of what 1 Peter 3 here is exhorting all Christians to be able to do in some capacity or another. Notice, this is not just to a particular group. This isn't just to priest or bishops, it's to all Christians, to be ready, to always be ready and prepared to give a "defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you."

However, notice the qualifier here. Peter says, but always "do it with gentleness and reverence." So the Greek word here for gentleness can also be translated as humility. And the Greek word for reverence is *phobos*, can mean fear as well. And it's the kind of thing that people would often be exhorted to have toward their superiors. You should fear the emperor or have respect for him is really what it means. So he makes a very important qualification. Sometimes when Christians are involved in explaining and defending their faith, they can become not just defensive, but also antagonistic or accusatory or harsh in responding to opposition and persecution. And Peter here is calling his readers to imitate Christ. And so you'll see, like for example, in the Passion narrative where Jesus quietly and silently receives the criticism of those who are attacking him, accusing him, and he will respond with few words, but he does it with gentleness and he does it with reverence. So that model here of a respectful apologia, a respectful explanation, a respectful defense of the Christian faith is something that every follower of Jesus should make a goal, especially if they're living in a time or a place or a culture which is opposed to the Church, which is opposed to the teachings of the faith,

which in our contemporary world, most Christians live in parts of the world today where there is great opposition to the Church.

So this is a very timely exhortation from 1 Peter 3. It's very fitting that the Church gives it to us during this Easter season, I think, in part, because not everyone does this, especially in places where people may have grown up as Christians and they either aren't aware of the opposition to the Church or they've never personally experienced opposition, persecution, or just demands for an explanation for why you believe what you believe or do what you do. It's easy to grow lax in this and not always be prepared, or find oneself often unprepared to give any explanation for why you believe what you believe or do what you do. And that's detrimental not only to the person who may be asking for an explanation, it's also detrimental to the faith of the Christian, him or herself, because the kind of preparation that goes into being able to make an *apologia* is going to presume that you not only know what you believe as a Christian or what to do, how to live as a follower of Jesus, you know why you believe what you believe and why you do what you do. And so an inability to explain oneself to another on points of practice and belief can often be rooted in a lack of a reasonable understanding for faith and practice in the person themselves, which can weaken a person and will often lead in times of suffering or persecution of the Church to apostasy or to falling away from the faith. So Peter here is giving very wise pastoral advice to his readers about the kind of formation and continued preparation that they should engage in living as Christians in a world opposed to the Church.

Now the other element here that he says is in verse 16... You not only need to be able to give a defense of your faith, you need to "keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." So notice the other thing he's pastorally recognizing. It's great to be an apologist, but it's not enough to give reasons and explanations for the faith if you yourself are not living in accordance with the faith. Because then what you end up doing is creating a hypocrite, someone who says one thing, who defends the faith through their words, but betrays the faith through their actions. So he's describing here a kind of integral Christianity where the person not only talks the talk but walks the walk. In other words, the words correspond to the actions. The

outward appearance corresponds to the interior disposition and the interior life of faith in the person.

And we don't have to make a long list here of the fact that throughout the history of the Church, and especially in recent times, there are public figures who were visibly lauded as either brilliant expositors or defenders of the faith, or noteworthy practitioners of the faith who were not actually keeping their consciences clear and living a life in accord with the faith, and then some scandal or something that was hidden in the life of that person becomes public. And then all of the public witness and defenses they gave to the faith crumbles because a scandal has been created that causes others to lose confidence in the Church or to lose faith in the Church or in other Christians. It becomes a negative witness. So Peter here gives a very powerful, very short but practical pastoral directive to the Christians. On the one hand, you need to be able to explain and defend your faith. On the other hand, if you're going to do that, you'd actually have to live it first. You need to keep your conscience clear so that when you're abused, it'll be your abusers who are put to shame rather than you and the Church who are put to shame for hypocrisy. As Peter says, verse 17, "For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong." Yeah, that's right. If you're doing wrong and you suffer, then you're bringing it upon yourself. But if you're doing right and you're suffering, then you're imitating Christ, you're being conformed to Christ. And if it's God's will that you do suffer in that way, then that is part of his providence. But if you suffer for doing wrong, then that is, of course, that falls to the person who's committing the wrong.

And here and finally, the very Christological letter, the rationale Peter gives for that is, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit..." So here we see, basically, Christ is the model of the righteous sufferer. In other words, the model for a Christian willingness to defend the faith and also be willing to suffer the faith is Christ himself, who dies for the ungodly in order to bring about the redemption of the world. The apologist who is prepared to explain and defend the faith and who willingly suffers for the sake of the faith, even when they've done nothing wrong, is in a particular way imitating Jesus himself, who spent three years publicly preaching, explaining, and proclaiming the gospel, and

then also publicly suffered for the sake of the gospel, though he had done no wrong, and eventually went to his death for the sake of the gospel.

And that is what will happen to some apologists. In fact, Justin Martyr himself, the great apologist that I mentioned earlier from the second century, is called Justin Martyr not because his parents gave him that name. That would be a real problem. Parents, don't name your kids martyr unless you want them to share the fate of Justin. He was called Martyr, obviously, because he bore witness to the gospel in a context of opposition, persecution, even unto death, unto his own martyrdom. So he is one of the most famous and prominent martyrs from the early Church. So he bears the prestigious title of Justin Martyr, Justin the witness, Justin, the one who laid down his life for the gospel.

So I'll close here with two quotes from the Living Tradition. One is from St. Augustine. In one of his letters, he just fleshes out the meaning of this passage from First Peter, and this is what he says:

The apostle tells us to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks us for *an explanation of our faith...*

That's what the apologia is, an explanation of our faith.

...because if an unbeliever asks me a reason for my faith and hope and I perceive that he cannot accept it unless he believes, I give him that very reason, so that he may see how absurd it is for him to ask a reason for things which he cannot grasp until he believes.²

Fascinating. Classic Augustine. He likes to take things and he shows the paradox of it too because there is this paradox. On the one hand, reasons are often a helpful and necessary prerequisite to faith. On the other hand, at the end of the day, because our faith is faith in a supernatural mystery, like the mystery of the Trinity, or the mystery of the incarnation, or the mystery of the Eucharist, Augustine is saying, the unbeliever doesn't understand this, but he can't actually fully grasp

² Augustine, *Letters* 120; trans. Wilfrid Parsons.

those mysteries until he's actually received the gift of faith, the supernatural gift of faith. So Augustine's laying out this very paradoxical but very important relationship between faith and reason in the Christian tradition. Apostolic Christianity does not reject reason, but it also recognizes that faith goes beyond reason because it is not against it but above it, because there are mysteries that actually exceed human reason that we can only receive through faith.

And then finally, another commentary on First Peter, again, that I'd recommend is from Bede the Venerable, one of the Doctors of the Church, and one of the only Doctors of the Church from Britain, from the British Isles, in the eighth century, and Bede here from England says this in his commentary:

In two ways ought we to give a reason for our hope and faith to those who demand it: *both by communicating the due motives for our hope and faith to all who ask*, whether believers or unbelievers; and *by always keeping the profession of our faith and hope unimpaired even amidst the pressures of our adversaries*, showing by our patience how reasonably we have learned that they are to be kept, for whose love we fear neither to suffer adversities nor undergo death.³

So notice what Bede is saying here, again, these two prongs of Peter's exhortation. On the one hand, we give the motives for believing the faith. On the other hand, we always try to keep the profession of faith and hope unimpaired. In other words, we have to live it out ourselves even though we're living amidst the world of adversaries and pressures and opponents, so that by both these things together we will show ourselves willing not just to testify to the faith, but even to undergo death, should that be what God calls us to.

So I close with just a kind of brief summary for this First Letter of Peter. The Church gives us a message that we need to hear in our own day. Every Christian really needs to hear it at some point, especially after you've been confirmed and you've received the Sacrament of Confirmation, which is a sacrament ordered toward evangelization, toward bearing witness. It's crucial for every adult Christian

³ Bede, *Commentary on 1 Peter* 3:15; trans. D. Hurst.

to recognize it's not enough to know what we believe or how we are to live. It's also important to know why we believe it and why we act the way that we do so that we're always ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks us about the hope that is in us.