

May 5, 2019 The Defiant Ones Homily: Just recently a distinguished American scholar, Fr. James Schall, a Jesuit priest, died at the age of ninety-one. A prolific writer, Fr. Schall taught for many years at one of our countries premier institutions of learning, Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. In one of his masterful essays, Fr. Schall writes of Easter as “A defiant feast”. What does he mean? To be defiant is to openly resist, push back and stand one’s ground. Clearly, in sacred scripture there are many acts of justifiable defiance. Of course the most obvious example is Christ Himself! He defied the religious and civil authorities of his day.

In today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we are introduced to “the defiant ones”.

The disciples of Jesus are arrested for a second time and are made to stand before the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jewish people. Earlier, Jewish leaders had strictly ordered them to abstain from teaching in the name of Jesus. “We gave you strict orders, did we not, to stop teaching in that name”. (Acts 5:28) For the apostles it was simply an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ. They refused to comply with their demand. “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), they protested. It was a tremendous act of defiance. As faithful witnesses, they were men of courage and principle. Their defiance proved costly. They were scourged and released with another warning. “So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the Name”. (Acts 5:41)

In many places of the world today, we are not allowed to speak of the Resurrection... in no public school, in few Muslim countries, not in the land of the great wall, China and only cautiously elsewhere, usually in restricted places as quietly as possible. But the Good News cannot be entirely stifled. Some of the world’s greatest music has been written because of this feast. (Handel’s masterwork “Messiah” is one shining example). At the end of the day, God’s word prevails.

It is interesting to note that all the apostles, save the Beloved Disciple, John, died brave deaths proclaiming the astonishing news of the Resurrection. The remarkable witness unto death continues today in such far off places as Sri Lanka, where nearly three hundred Christians were brutally massacred on Easter morning, Nigeria, Pakistan and Egypt. In country after country Christians are beheaded, stoned, and shot. They remained defiant until the very end of their life

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad because your reward will be great in heaven”. (Mt.5:11-12) In his commentary on the fifth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the Protestant biblical scholar, William Barclay points out that in the early days of The Russian revolution in the second decade of the twentieth century a man who could show his chain marks on his hands and the marks on his back was held in high esteem because he suffered for Christ.

We must all pray for the courage to be defiant in the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord and Savior.

In the sixteenth century Saint Thomas More, an English jurist and Chancellor openly defied his king Henry VIII. For his insubordination, he was sentenced to be executed in the infamous tower of London. On the day of his martyrdom, Sir Thomas mounted the scaffold, the raised platform on which criminals were, at the time, executed. His courageous final words are worth quoting. “I die the king’s faithful servant but God’s first.” Surely the apostles of our Lord’s time would gladly agree. “We must obey God rather than men”. (Acts 5:29)

Amen!