

Martyr's Fear

June 22, 2008

(St. Alban's Day - Pentecost 6 - Year A)

Matthew 10: 24-39

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Throughout the Scriptures, God tells us not to be afraid.

When the angel tells Mary that she will be pregnant, the angel tells Mary not to be afraid.

The angels in the fields around Bethlehem tell the shepherds not to be afraid.

The risen Jesus tells the women who have seen the empty tomb not to be afraid.

Yet, in today's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus *does* tell us that there *is* a time when fear is appropriate.

Jesus says:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul;
Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Jesus tells us that we have a choice.

We can be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.
Or, better yet, we should fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Today in our church, we celebrate St. Alban's Day.

In the Episcopal Church, we do not worship saints and we do not pray to them.

However, we recognize that saints are real people who lived real lives and their real stories are examples that we can learn from.

Alban was a real man who lived a real life and who made a real choice.

Alban made a choice based on whom he feared more.

Did he fear a Roman judge the most or did he fear God the most?

Alban lived in the 3rd century in what is now England.

The city where Alban lived was ruled by the Romans and Alban

worshiped Roman gods.

One day, Alban was visited by a Christian priest, fleeing persecution.

This priest began to teach Alban about the Christian faith.

Alban was then converted and baptized as a Christian.

When the Roman authorities came after this priest, Alban hid him in his house.

Yet eventually the Roman authorities discovered that a Christian priest was hiding out at Alban's house.

So, Alban exchanged clothes with the priest.

The real priest escaped.

And Alban, dressed in priest's clothing, was captured by the Romans and put on trial before a Roman judge.

When he arrived at his trial on June 22nd, in the year 304, the judge asked Alban a question:

"What is your family and race?"

Alban replied:

"How does my family concern you?"

If you wish to know the truth about my religion, know that I am a Christian and am ready to do a Christian's duty."

Yet the judge insisted:

"I demand to know your name - tell me at once."

Alban answered:

"My parents named me Alban.

And I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things."

Then, Alban was tortured.

And on June 22nd, which is now his feast day, Alban was killed by having his head cut off.

Jesus says:

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul;

Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

St. Alban did not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

St. Alban did not fear the Roman judge who sentenced him to death. Instead, Alban feared God more than he feared those who can kill the body.

Alban stood before the judge and bravely proclaimed his faith by saying:

“My parents named me Alban.

And I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things.”

In our own lives, we are given choices about whom or what we will be afraid of.

We can be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Or, we can fear God more - and bravely and boldly proclaim our faith, the faith of Alban, who died for his friend.

For Alban stood boldly before the judge and proclaimed:

“If you wish to know the truth about my religion, know that I am a Christian and am ready to do a Christian’s duty.”

As we all know, the duty of a Christian is to love God and to love our neighbor as our self.

And Alban did his Christian duty by loving *his* neighbor as himself.

You see, Alban not only proclaimed his Christian faith in words.

Alban also put his money where his mouth is and acted upon his faith by giving up his life for his friend.

This last week, I was presented with a choice of whom or what to fear.

I was in a meeting and someone told what they thought was a “joke.”

However, I did not think it was a joke at all.

Instead, this “joke” was a bigoted comment that did not respect the dignity of every human being.

I had a choice of whom I should fear.

I could stay silent.

Or I could fear God more - and love other people as much - or more - than I love myself.

So, I made a choice to fear God and God's people more than I would fear the opinion of this inappropriate joke-teller.
And I asked for an apology from this person who made the insensitive comment.

For Jesus says:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul;
Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body.”

In the past week, it seemed that the death of Tim Russert touched many of us deeply.

Tim Russert was a very public man, a broadcaster for NBC News, who was in the limelight and who had every opportunity to become stuck on himself and out of touch with real life.

However, what struck so many people about the life of Tim Russert was the choices that Tim Russert made.

He devoted his life to his son and to other people's children.

He kept a vow to go to church every week, attending Mass on Saturday of each week because he broadcasted the show *Meet the Press* on Sunday mornings.

Tim Russert made choices to fear God - and he lived those choices through his love of God.

He lived those choices through his love for other people.

I asked everyone to wear the color red to church today.

The color red - which is the same color as blood - has always been the color that is associated with martyrs.

Martyrs are people who die for their faith.

Martyrs are people who do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Martyrs are people who make choices every day:

Choices to love other people first and to be a news broadcaster second.

Choices to speak out against bigotry and injustice,

Choices to exchange clothes with a priest and to die for a friend.

What choices do you make?

Do you love other people first and your job second?

Do you make it a priority to worship God at least every week?

Do you respect the dignity of every human being by speaking out
against prejudice and bigotry and intolerance?

As for me, I hope that I will not choose to fear those who kill the body
but cannot kill the soul.

Instead, I hope that I will fear God, choosing to stand up for my faith
and say:

“My parents named me Jeff.

And I worship and adore the true and living God.”

AMEN.

© The Rev. Jeff W. Fisher, 2008