

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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April 17, 2016

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I came across a cartoon in a magazine this week that showed God and one of his angels gazing down from heaven on planet Earth with rather forlorn expressions on their faces. God is saying, "I'm starting to prefer the ones who don't believe in me." Obviously, that is sarcasm from the cartoonist, but I'm pretty sure I understand it. It often seems that nobody is more capable of cruelty, inhumanity and violence than the people who claim to be doing things in the name of God, and with His approval. And it is a particular temptation for followers of what are known as the three great "Religions of the Book," namely Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. That's because we and they are convinced that we can point to definitive scriptural texts that express God's will in an unalterable and definitive way. For us it's right there in the Bible. We may be absolutely certain about what we can find in there.

But actually, it's not quite as true as we may first think, not because there's something wrong with the Bible, but because there is often quite a bit wrong with our attempt at understanding it. And more specifically, we can often be prone to mistaking *confidence* with *certainty* when it comes to God and religion. And if that sentence doesn't seem entirely clear, then that's evidence of the problem. Because *certainty* is something that I profess to have as a possession. But *confidence* is something I am willing to hand over as a gift to someone else. When I am *certain* about an aspect of my religion, then growth stops and nobody else's voice is permitted to be heard anymore, not even the voice of the Holy Spirit. Certainty encloses me with a soundproof wall where I retreat when I am confused and from which I can lash out in anger when I feel threatened. Nobody else gets to tamper with my certainty.

But confidence is something else. Confidence is unshakable trust that I am being guided and cared for at every moment of my living and my dying, my successes and my mistakes, by a God who loves me. And when it comes to the Bible, confidence is the assurance that I'm looking in the right place and listening to the right voices as I try to understand the mysteries of faith ever more clearly. Ironically for us Christians, in the end the only thing we can be certain about are things that cannot be firmly and finally defined: St. Paul identified them as faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of them is love. And who has ever written the definitive doctoral dissertation about the meaning of love? It isn't possible. We write *poetry* about it, and *songs* about it, and we tell stories and extend physical gestures about it, but that's not conceptual certainty. That is absolute confidence.

And our reactions to perceived threats are entirely the opposite. When my *certainty* is called into question or challenged, I react with hostility—because it's *mine*, subject to being stolen. But when my *confidence* is shaken, I react with a quest to better understand the one in whom I have put my trust—because it *doesn't* belong to me. Religious people don't go to war because of a lack of *confidence*, but they often do that for fear of *uncertainty*. I know that this can all seem a kind of academic and abstract distinction, but so much hinges on it being made...like whether I and we are going to live in a constant state of anger, and fear, and defensiveness, or whether we will live in a peaceful hope and trust in the One in whom we have placed our confidence. Nobody can take that away without our consent.

Paul and Barnabas were traveling all over the Mediterranean world as the very first ambassadors of the church and proclaimers of Jesus' resurrection. We just heard the story announced in today's first reading. Theirs is a perfect example of the confrontation between *certainty* and *confidence*. They were not preaching about their

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own certainty, because they weren't preaching about themselves at all. Their message was all about Jesus and God. But the response of many of the Jewish leaders, we are told, was jealousy and anger. These are emotions that can only be aroused when people feel threatened with the loss of something they own, or have to defend. The opponents were in possession of *certainty* (or so they imagined). Paul and Barnabas didn't have to defend their confidence in Christ Jesus, which is *why*—amazingly—their reaction to being persecuted and deported was not rage, or despair, or violence; it was *joy*. That's what the Acts of the Apostles reports today. Incredible! What a blessed way to live—even through suffering, and danger, and conflict. I want to be able to be like that.

Their confidence and joy was a reflection of the teaching of Jesus in today's gospel, a teaching that was/is meant for everybody who has become a part of the Christian family through baptism. Our trust is no longer in ourselves or in the cleverness with which we can think ourselves into certainties. Our trust is in a *person*, in Jesus, in God, in whom we can have absolute confidence.

"I know my sheep, they hear me and follow me. I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one can take them out of my hand."

I and we may dare to trust that these holy mysteries are absolute and true. We may offer as a gift to God our confidence in that, rather than impoverishing our faith by imagined certainties which will always be subject to questions and even attacks.

This weekend, the young people of our parish who are celebrating their First Eucharist are doing so under the very same conditions that the vast majority of us did too. They are mostly 7 years old, able to be *certain* of very little, but able to be *confident* of very much. Confident that the world is governed by love rather than hate, able to be negotiated best through friendship rather than violence, and ultimately ordered to God rather than humans. Let their public witness be a living sign of what confidence can mean for all of us. Let them teach us—especially the most callous and disillusioned among us. They are our hope.