

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -- Portsmouth, Ohio May 16, 1971

"YOU ARE MY EVIDENCE" -- by: Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-12; Acts 1:1-11

Text: Isaiah 43:10; Acts 1:8

The word "witness" makes me feel uncomfortable. It means someone asking me if I am "born again" or "saved". It means being handed a pamphlet luridly describing Hell. It's a sign on the side of the road saying, "Prepare to meet thy God." It's trying to get two Mormon Missionaries out of your house.

Unfortunately, witnessing or bearing a witness has been horribly vulgarized. We react negatively to that kind of approach. "Witnessing" makes us feel uncomfortable. It appears self-righteous. But as a result of our reaction, I wonder if we have done something equally as deplorable by rejecting or being fearful of any personal or corporate witness as Christians? Have we thrown out the baby with the bath?

The last words of Christ before his ascension were "Ye shall be my witnesses." These words imply that Christ will no longer be with the disciples. The ascension of Christ, for all of its difficulty of a man being levitated skyward, was simply a dramatic way to emphasize that Jesus Christ parted from the disciples in such a way that they became more assured than ever of his royal power and divine rule. Christ was to be no longer in the world in a visible bodily way. The disciples will have to take his place. They will be the Body of Christ in the world. They will be the evidence that he is still alive and at work in the world.

"Ye shall be my witnesses." What did he mean? How are we to be witnesses? Rather than to allow the undisciplined emotions of sectarian religion to answer and to tell us how we are to witness, let's approach the question in the tradition of the Reformation, by appealing directly to Scripture to see how the word is used.

We discover that the word "witness" as used in the book of Acts is a term referring not to all Christians, but only to those who had witnessed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Apostle Peter tells us very plainly "we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead." (Acts 10:39-41)

A witness was one who had eaten and drunk with Christ after he had been raised from the dead. Witnessing was not primarily a matter of saying something to others. Primarily it was a matter of having seen something. It was a matter of having witnessed the Risen Christ.

Invariably this is the way the word is used in Acts. Invariably all the early Christian sermons were concluded with the affirmation, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all (Apostles) are witnesses."

Nothing could make it plainer that you and I are not witnesses nor can we ever be. We have not seen Jesus of Nazareth, we have not seen the Risen Christ, because, as our text points out, he has ascended. He is no longer present with us in the same way he was with the Apostles. Nothing could be plainer. We are not witnesses.

We are not witnesses of the things which took place in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago. The world in which Jesus lived seems far removed from the world in which we live. We cannot remove the barrier of 2000 years that separate us from Jesus of Nazareth. There is no time machine that will take us back to the Sea of Galilee to hear him preach, to see him heal. History is an impenetrable wall. We can never be a witness of the Jesus of History.

The writer of the first Epistle of John tells us "that which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled...that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us..."

(I Jhn. 1:1,3)

That is something we cannot say! We have not seen, nor heard, or touched Jesus of Nazareth because he has ascended. If we only could perhaps some of our questions could be answered. But he is no longer with us in an historical person. He has ascended.

All we can do is listen to their witness. All we can do is to enter into fellowship with those who have heard and seen. All we can do is to listen and to ask others to listen with us to their witness, and not only listen to it, but study it, and teach it to our children, and inasmuch as it has the ring of truth, to believe and act upon it.

That is what the Bible is, a witness, a compilation of 66 books written by many different men over a period of a thousand or more years, and they all bear witness to the same God. In the Old Testament we hear the witness of prophets and kings and priests, and patriarchs who heard and saw and experienced events which they interpreted as God's special activity. The Apostles wanted to make it clear that in Jesus of Nazareth they saw the very same God at work. As Peter spoke in his sermon, "To him give all the prophets witness..." (Acts 10:43)

No, we cannot be witnesses because we have not heard and seen the things the prophets and apostles heard and saw. We can only listen with open ears and open minds. We can only enter into fellowship with the prophets and apostles and hear their witness. We can only point others to that witness in humility, realizing that we are calling others to listen with us to their witness. We are not calling them to listen to us; to our religious experiences and feelings and ideas. We are calling them to listen with us.

We would like to have witnessed these things but we have not. Christ has ascended and it seems that nowhere can God be seen. How can anybody be a witness of God's activity in our world? Where in all the universe can we point and say, "There God is at work in such a way that no one can deny it?" Things are not that evident. How can we be witnesses when nowhere is God to be seen?

In our Old Testament lesson we read, "Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, ...that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he; before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me." (Isa. 43:10)

The people to whom these words were addressed had much in common with us. Their world was as absent of God as is ours. They looked for the coming of the Messiah to restore their kingdom. We also await the return of Christ to restore and establish his kingdom of love and righteousness.

From the context of these verses we know that they describe events sometime after 587 B.C. when the Kingdom of Judah fell. The dominant power in the world is the Babylonian empire. The Jews are in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the cities of Judah have been destroyed and are desolate. The temple lies in ruin. The Israelite monarchy is a thing of the past.

Things could not be worse for the Jews. The words of the Psalmist express their desolation. "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down, year, we wept when we remembered Zion." (Psa. 137:1) Not only was this a defeat and humiliation for the Jews, it was a defeat for their God. They thought back to the good old days that their forefathers had spoken of; the days when God was working and you could see him. They ask, "...thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies. Thou makest us to turn back from the enemy:" (Psa. 44:9-10)

It seemed as though no longer was God on their side. God is nowhere to be seen. They live in a secular society surrounded by strange gods. Perhaps God never had gone out with their armies. Maybe he never had delivered them from Egypt. Perhaps he was not there. Maybe he had never been there. Perhaps the strange gods of the Babylonians were the true gods. God seemed to be blind to their needs. He was deaf to their cries.

. . . 3 - You are my evidence.

But through the mouth of Israel's most eloquent prophet, Isaiah, God assures Israel that he will redeem her. God will destroy Babel by means of Cyrus the Persian conqueror.

God will gather the scattered members of Israel and bring them home. "Fear not, for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back; bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth." (Isa. 43:5-6)

The nations will see in Israel's deliverance the evidence of God's activity in the world because God has predicted it through the mouth of his prophet Isaiah. "Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth."

With all the nations observing, God will present Israel for his evidence. The Hebrew word for "witness" also means "evidence" or "proof". "You shall be my evidence. You shall be the only proof that I will give to the nations for my presence and activity in the world."

What is the burden of this evidence? Here the monotheism of Isaiah emerges in full force. Israel will be the evidence of the fact that Jehovah alone is God and that he is eternal. The act of God delivering her from Babylon and restoring the temple was to be the evidence of God working in history. Israel will witness to the truth of God's power and activity by proving that He has the power to restore His people in accordance with His predictions, and that there is no god beside Him. (Isa. 43:10-12)

And if there is no god beside Him it naturally follows that He must be the God of all men. So the election of Israel is not merely a privilege but also a service. Jehovah has chosen her that she may carry the true religion to the nations.

Israel's mission to the nations is to be fulfilled, not so much by active propaganda, as by bearing witness to the truth of Jehovah's divinity and power and that there is no God beside him.

According to the Old Testament usage of the word, Christians can be witnesses in the sense that we are the evidence that God is alive and working in history. The church should be the evidence for the work of God in our world. The church bears witness to the presence of God in a secular society as it becomes engaged in God's work of reconciliation and healing. The church is to bear witness to the justice and love of its creator.

We as Christians are to be the evidence of the work of God in the world and in a nation that has no need of the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This is the difficulty. We are to evidence the fact that God is alive in a world where man is unable to see him. We are to live and speak in such a way that there can be no doubt that God is at work.

Albert Camus challenges us when he writes, "What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out loud and clear in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. They should get away from abstractions and confront the bloodstained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and pay up personally."

No, we cannot be witnesses of the resurrection, but we can be the evidence that Christ is still alive. And we can do more than that. Though we have not witnessed the resurrection we can be a witness to the power of the risen Christ in the world, He is there where ever healing takes place; where ever reconciliation is achieved; whenever peace is enjoyed. The Christian has the responsibility to point others to the true cause of these blessings. We are responsible as Christians to point others to the God who is alive and at work in the world.

But this becomes increasingly difficult for man come of age. We do not need God because we are able to do everything that we once depended upon Him for. Why should men and women listen to us? Why should they want to see that God is alive and at work? Do not men and women get along perfectly well without Him? If we are sick we go to a doctor. We don't need Christ to hear us. If we are hungry we go out and work for our daily bread. We don't need Christ to multiply loaves and fishes. We have developed a world where faith in Christ seems superfluous.

Therefore, we can have no assurance that our evidence or our witness will open the eyes of those who cannot or do not want to see his presence or acknowledge their dependence of Him. Many people saw Jesus of Nazareth. They observed him and saw the things he did. But not all witness what was going on there. They did not witness or recognize God's work in him. His neighbors said, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" What right does he have to say all these things about God? "And they were offended in him." (Matt. 13:55)

They did not see God in Christ. It has never been easy to see God in any age. The man who cannot see God at work in the world today would not be convinced if he were to see Jesus of Nazareth.

It was not for any good work that Christ was crucified. (John 10:33) Good deeds and acts of mercy, in themselves, do not bear witness to God. In themselves good works bear witness to our pride and autonomy. To enter into good works, to become involved in the cause of justice and peace is necessary for the Church but to do this without making it clear that it is not we who do these good things, but God at work in us; to do these things without making it perfectly clear who it is that is working in us is to confirm the pride of autonomous man, to assure him of his goodness apart from God, and to encourage him in his independence from God.

But to attribute this work to God alone is to condemn our own works of greed, mismanagement, selfishness, and complacency. It is to make us dependent on his goodness rather than our goodness.

It was not for any good deed that Christ was crucified. It was not for any good deed that the early Christians were martyred. It was for the witness they bore to the God who was at work within them and within the world. The God who was at work in Jesus of Nazareth, who raised him from the dead, and made him both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

So the word "witness" began to take on a new meaning that it never had before in the Greek language. The word "witness" began to mean "one who voluntarily suffers death for his witness to the work of God in Christ." The Greek word for "witness" is "martyr". It soon became evident that if a Christian witnessed to the work of God in Christ that he was liable to be persecuted and killed. If a person showed evidence for being a Christian he was liable to suffer martyrdom. This raises a perplexing question for those of us who are Christians today. If we were to be arrested today for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to prove out guilt?