

Preached Sunday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, by Christian Rudd

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, to never know God's plans or times yet still follow what we have been commanded. This is the legacy that Jesus left us before his ascension.

I'd like to start today's homily with a question. How many of you here would say that an octopus has a beak? Interesting. A couple of nights ago I returned home to find my mother and sister in a heated argument over this very question. One of my sister's homework assignments spoke of an octopus using its beak to crunch a crab's shell to get at the meat. To verify this we checked many sources on the Internet, all of which agreed that an octopus DID in fact have a beak, similar to that of parrot. I guess that, like me, many of you are surprised to find this seemingly astonishing piece of information. Yet, think about our readings today, and indeed many passages from the Gospels. More often than not, Jesus' acts leave his disciples in awe, dumbfounded by what he has just done. In Acts today, after Jesus has risen to Heaven, two “men in white robes” appear, whom I believe we can safely assume to be angels. They question the disciples, who are staring blankly at the sky, as to why they are just standing there staring. They ask as though Jesus' ascension to Heaven is nothing out of the ordinary. This happens so often in the Gospels. Jesus' amazing miracles leave the disciples awestruck, while Jesus acts like it's just the norm. Remember the disciples, on a boat, with a huge storm brewing, threatening to flip their boat! They quickly wake up Jesus, and imagine his reaction: “What's goin on now guys? What, this? Come on now... Quiet down winds! Calm down waves, rain, stop! Ugh, we good now guys? Can you handle it from here? Aight now I'm goin back to sleep. Next time wake me up for something real...” As though calming a storm was a regular act. For Jesus, it was. Where am I going with this? Think about it like this: if one were to ask a biologist, a zoologist, or perhaps any scientist, whether an octopus had a beak, they would say, “Well of course! I thought everyone knew that...” Unfortunately for most of us the anatomy of gastropods is not our area of learning, or in fact even on our level of learning. Hearing that an octopus has a beak, characteristic of birds, is shocking. To the disciples, miracles and ascensions were shocking. None of us can even comprehend such powers. But to Jesus, or an angel, these are nothing, like an octopus having a beak is nothing to a scientist. We are not on a level of thinking where we can understand what God does or thinks. It is beyond us. But he sent Jesus to us as a human to help us understand. When Jesus ascended to Heaven, he left his final commands for the apostles to carry out, to be witnesses throughout the world. This is for us to do also. Even though we cannot fully understand God's ways, it is still our duty as Christians to follow his will and live as witnesses amongst the people of this world.

Next week is Pentecost. The feast of Pentecost is the celebration of the

fulfillment of Jesus' last words to his disciples, that they would receive the power to be his witnesses on Earth. This, too is our greatest calling as Christians, to live our lives as witnesses to Christ, to help others by showing them the love of God. Indeed, as the spiritual descendants of the apostles, is our work any different from theirs? For the disciples, being a witness for Christ meant enduring everything from insult to martyrdom. While for us it may not be extreme, for many it is still difficult to assert ourselves as witnesses of Jesus. For my own part, being a practicing Christian is particularly difficult, having grown up in an age where it is almost frowned upon to make any reference to one's own faith in public. Yet even under such circumstances we should never be afraid of what we are. Peter tells us to “discipline [ourselves]” and to remain steadfast in [our] faith,” even when faced with the devil or the revilement of others. In fact, he calls this revilement a blessing, for in being hated for being a Christian we have the Spirit of God resting on us.

So how can we be witnesses in society today? For my part, I don't believe that either Jesus or Peter is requiring that we go preach the Gospel on the streets. In fact, being a young person today when most my age have little concern for religion or God or anything for that matter, it is especially hard to hold on to my beliefs, much less be a witness for them. As Peter says, the devil is on the prowl. Therefore, in today's more cynical world, one of the best ways to be a witness for Christ is simply to live by example. I'm sure you've all heard the phrase, “They will know we are Christians by our love,” or more generally, “Actions speak louder than words.” This is not to say that the Gospel does not need to be preached, but rather that, in my experience, people will better understand your intentions if you exemplify them in your actions rather than words. For instance, for today's youth, such as myself, there is a wide variety of extra-curricular activities to take part in. As the name implies, these are all optional things. Yet, while one can take part in sports, or band, or other activities that are just for the sake of the individual or group, there is also a wide variety of clubs that one can join to help others. As a youth, one of the best ways to live the Christian example is to take part in these things. For me, these are Boy Scouts, National Honor Society, and InterAct, a Rotary sponsored service club. By doing these kinds of activities, many students today are able to take part in voluntary community service, which people notice. I don't pretend to be ignorant of adults' general view of kids today. Yet, when people see youth voluntarily doing work to better their community, they see something different than they're used to; they see them, rather than focusing completely on themselves, helping others and asking nothing in return. This is exemplifying the love of God, and this is the kind of thing that Jesus calls for when he says to be a witness for him on Earth.

To further apply this, when taking part in other activities, like the aforementioned band and sports, we can still be witnesses just by showing good sportsmanship, or being fair and honest. Once people know that we are Christians from what we say, they will begin to look at our actions everywhere,

in our lives and even in places like work. People will look to see if we are living by example in all parts of life, and by being honest and loving people, we can teach God's love everywhere.

Likewise, I understand that one of the best ways to set an example today is simply by coming to church every week. This shows one's commitment to Christ. For kids my age, this is something that few now do. Yet, look at all of us here today, putting on a youth service. This is our way of being a witness for Christ.

I mentioned earlier that next week is Pentecost. Before Jesus' ascent to Heaven, he told the disciples that they would receive the power to be his witnesses on Earth. But where does this power come from? Why does the Holy Spirit descend upon them, and where do we get the power to resist the devil and be Christian witnesses?

Our Gospel today comes from Jesus' prayer shortly before his arrest and subsequent crucifixion. In this "High Priestly" prayer, Jesus is praying for all of us. He is asking for God's protection and love over those that God has "given him", i.e. we Christians. He refers to us five separate times over the course of this prayer as "those whom [God has] given [him]." He was shortly to leave the Earth, and he knew his work was to be carried on by his disciples and later all Christians. It is thanks to Jesus not only that we received salvation and eternal life in God, but also that we may continue his work in helping others to find God's love as well. In this he sought to show us the unity that He had with God, and help us find that same unity as Christians. Indeed, Peter's words were that even when we are suffering, we can know that there are Christians around the world suffering as we do, and that together we can suffer and have the Spirit of God upon us.

Today we are celebrating Jesus' ascension to Heaven. We are celebrating Jesus leaving this world to reunite with God, so that we could continue his work on Earth. It is our blessing to pass on Jesus' message to everyone, whether it be through our words, our actions, or our love. We must work together as Christians to be witnesses in Brevard, our Jerusalem, or in our Judea and Samaria – North Carolina and America, and to the ends of the earth – the greater world we all live in. This is why Jesus went back up to Heaven, so that he could send the Holy Spirit, part of himself, down to be in all of us, to unite us as Christians so that we can keep the devil at bay and stay steadfast in our faith, and to show the world God's love as Jesus himself did.

Amen