

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning. Welcome to morning prayers at the Memorial Church. Our responsorial Psalm this morning is Psalm 8, which is found on page four in your Psalter. Please rise and make your responses in bold. O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name throughout the earth. You who have covered the heavens with your splendor.

Congregation:

From the mouths of infants and sucklings you have founded strength on account of your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place.

Congregation:

For what is man that you have been mindful of him, mortal man that you have taken note of him.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

That you have made him a little less than divine and adorned him with glory and majesty.

Congregation:

You have made him master over your handiwork, laying the world at his feet.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Sheep and oxen, all of them, the wild beasts too.

Congregation:

The birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, whatever travels the paths of the seas.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth.

Choir:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the Gospel according to St. Luke. Jesus said, "And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the son of man will acknowledge before the angels of God, but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the son of man will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourself or what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say." Here endeth the reading.

One thing I like to do is to look at the calendar of Saints in my church, in the Episcopal Church, it's called Lesser Feasts and Fasts. I like to do this because it reminds us of the diversity of Christian experience across time and place but also because in being reminded of that complicated and sometimes quite difficult history, we are always given a window into our own lives as Christians as well. Today in my tradition is the Feast of the Martyrs of New Guinea.

In 1952, the Japanese landed in Papua, New Guinea. The Bishop of Queensland, Australia, who had oversight of Papua, New Guinea at the time told the church workers there not to abandon their posts when the Japanese came and eight of them were killed in the first invasion and eventually over 340 were killed during the Japanese occupation of Papua, New Guinea. Most of them Australians and Americans.

This lesson we have from Luke, that the church assigns for this day from Luke seems an apt choice. It's about not backing down before trials. That's what these martyrs did. They were told to stay and they stayed. There's a tricky line in it too, anyone who blasphemes against the son of man will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Now I am a scholar of Christian forgiveness. That's been the focus of my research for the past, I guess six years, which sounds longer than I want it to be. And I'm not going to tackle the question of forgiveability. Not if I'm going to get you out of here by 8:45.

I only want to say now that Jesus is observing there is some difference between saying a word against him and betraying the Holy Spirit. And so I was wrestling with that and trying to figure out what is the difference between betraying Jesus and betraying the Holy Spirit? And I'm trained as a theologian and friends, I immediately escaped into theology to avoid the hard question. I started thinking about the nature of the Trinity. How is it we could betray one person of the Trinity without betraying the other person of the Trinity? Does this somehow confuse the unconfused divine natures of the three persons? And I realized as I was doing this, that what I was doing was going down a rabbit hole of kind of intellectual acrobatics in order to avoid the real world stakes of this question because there are real world stakes to this question.

Think of all the Christians who have done evil in Jesus' name, who have kept his name while blaspheming his Spirit. In our own day, white Christian nationalists, who keep his name but betray his Spirit. But it's not new. The history of Christian life shows a long tradition of this. There is a long record of massacres of Jewish people in medieval Europe. Lauren Winner has a really important book called, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, that shows that many, many beloved churches in Europe are built upon the sites of Jewish massacres, an idea that makes my skin crawl. The Crusades, also faithful to the name but not the Spirit of Jesus. In our own land, forced Christian boarding schools for indigenous peoples. In our own day, so-called conversion therapy for BGLTQ young people. And all of this in the name of Jesus.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

When we Christians do some of the worst things we've done, we often do so invoking Jesus' name. The real blasphemy in those cases, the real betrayal, is not that we got his name wrong but we betrayed his Spirit. And you get the feeling, not just from this reading but from all the gospels, that Jesus cares a lot

more about us doing what he says than saying who he is. Why else would he say, "Tell no one who I am," in one moment, and in the next moment say, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

And I forgot one example of this named Christian violence. Of course, missionary colonialism. The martyrs of New Guinea were courageous Christians who refused to abandon their posts and were murdered by the Japanese for that refusal. I'm not trying to denigrate their memory in the least this morning but Papua, New Guinea had been colonized by four different Western powers, including two different Australian agencies at the same time for a period of time before the Japanese arrived to colonize them again in 1942. The rampant violence of colonialism was not a new story to Papua, New Guinea in 1942. And by remembering only eight men, the eight who died when the Japanese invaded, by remembering only them this day, we show faith to the name of Christ but not to his Spirit of solidarity with oppressed peoples everywhere.

And to bring this into our recent moment even more, I also feel I have to say that given the recent events in Afghanistan, another nation with a history of occupation and reoccupation, exploitation and re-exploitation by world powers, it's hard not to wonder if in the name of good principles like democracy and justice and civility and human rights, we haven't just spent 20 years betraying and blaspheming the very substance of those principles with our Lord.

I'm not sure what Jesus means about forgiveability and unforgivability here but I also guess we shouldn't be surprised that he sees one sin as worse than the other. If you love him, keep his commandments. Please rise if you are able, for the prayers.

Almighty God, who has given us grace at this time and with one accord to make our common supplication unto thee and as promised through thou well beloved son that when two or three are gathered together in his name, thou wilt be in the midst of them, fulfill now O Lord the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be best for us, granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth and in the world to come, life everlasting. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

We pray now the words Jesus taught us saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in singing Hymn 203.

Congregation:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing of the power of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be among you all and remain with you always. Amen. Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

(singing).