

July 8, 2019

Church of the Holy Apostles, Virginia Beach, VA
Celebration of New Ministry for Fr. Mario Melendez and
Remembrance of Fr. Jan Hus, Prophetic Witness & Martyr, 1415
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

This is a day of great celebration and commemoration. Of course we celebrate the beginning of the new ministry of Fr. Mario and the people of the Church of the Holy Apostles. In so doing we celebrate the common bond we have between our Roman Catholic and Episcopal congregations.

One of the roles for a priest of the church is to be a prophet. Hence, it is fitting that on this sixth day of July we celebrate and commemorate the life of someone else whom Roman Catholics and Episcopalians hold in common: the fifteenth century priest Fr. Jan Hus. Jan Hus was the priest for a congregation in Prague, in what we know today as the Czech Republic. A reformer, he was passionate to make the liturgy and scriptures accessible to all God's people. This meant that their worship and study had to be in the language of the people. All went well until some of his fellow clergy thought he went too far, and then soon everyone wanted him removed and banished from their city. On one day the people whom he was serving loved him, but as the tide quickly turned, he had almost no friends whatsoever. Relieved of his duties and branded as a heretic, he went into exile.

After a few years he heard about the Ecumenical Council of Constance that was to be held. Perhaps, he thought, this would be the place to clear his name of the charges of heresy. After inquiring about the possibilities Fr. Jan was at first assured of safe passage to and a voice at the council. Hence he went, and once again the tide turned. The pledge of safe conduct from the emperor couldn't stand up to Fr. Jan's enemies who wanted him to be imprisoned until he could be tried for the charges of heresy. Quickly the trial progressed and he was convicted. Efforts were made to get Fr. Jan to recant and say that he did not intend reform and would return his ministry back to the status quo. The stark options were to either recant or die. A man of great principle, he chose the latter.

Jan Hus was tied to the stake for execution on July 6th, 1415. As the firewood surrounding him was about to be ignited it is recorded that he said the following: "The principal intention of my preaching and of all my other acts or writings was solely that I might turn men from sin. And in that truth of the Gospel that I wrote, taught, and preached in accordance with the sayings and expositions of the holy doctors (of the Church), I am willing gladly to die today."¹

If the leaders of the Church thought that Fr. Jan's death would end the reform movement he had supported and furthered, they were very wrong. The Czech

¹ <https://www.riteseries.org/brain/hwhm/6/243/>. Accessed 7/5/2019.

reformation continued with Fr. Jan's rousing assertion "Truth will conquer," today the motto of the Czech Republic.

Reading and hearing the Gospel of Matthew and hearing the story of Fr. Jan leads me to believe that there are at least two good reasons for a Christian leader to be led to such sacrificial service. The first is for the cause of a thoroughgoing faith in our Lord and the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. The second, which connects well with what we are doing today, is to serve God's people.

Hear the words of Jesus again from the Gospel: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."² There is a delightful children's book by Carolyn Bohler entitled God is Like a Mother Hen and Much, Much More. Her book begins begins, "God is like a Mother Hen... who protects her little chicks."³ In this little book the mother hen is pictured as stretching out her loving wings to protect and gather her baby chicks. This is the God to whom, when needed, we can always return to be comforted. Though often we think of this word picture as a fitting bedtime story to which we can gently rock our children to sleep, the truth behind Jesus' words is much more. This is Jesus' image intended to keep alive the faith of adults and children alike as they struggle to grasp the truth and hold to their faith as they walk through the daily struggles of life.

Shortly we shall renew our baptismal vows and in so doing renew our commitment to Christ as our Lord. Likewise we will renew our commitment to one another as we serve in our current day apostolic ministry. The celebration of a new ministry is a celebration and commemoration of the commitment that Church of the Holy Apostles Christians have to and for one another. In times and seasons of celebration, grief, loss, and tragedy we need one another. On an occasion such as this it is important for us to gather and renew our commitment to be committed to one another in this part of the Body of Christ.

Our ecumenical commitment to one another in Holy Apostles is a phenomena which is being watched by the world. Your uniqueness though is more than being the only congregation like this in the world. Your uniqueness is in the caring fulfillment of your baptismal vows to care for one another in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that the Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord of Jan Hus, and the Lord of the Church of the Holy Apostles will continue to bless your fellowship. Amen.

² Matthew 23:37, NRSV.

³ Carolyn Stahl Bohler, God Is Like a Mother Hen and Much, Much More (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1996), no page numbers.