

The news this week probably disappointed 20,000 of our troops in Iraq who were planning to come home. Now they are asked to stay in an increasingly dangerous situation. The conviction of our troops is admirable. They believe so strongly in the values of our country and the current needs of the Iraqis that they are willing to put their own lives at risk.

In the early church, Christians had the same kind of conviction. As they spread the news of the resurrection, they found themselves in danger of alienating their friends, splitting up their families, incarceration, exile and some of the most brutal forms of death imaginable.

Today, threats to Christians are not so severe, but they are there. A political candidate who stands for human life will not win an election. If you give to charities rather than spend on yourself, you feel out of step. If you criticize the moral behavior of a family member, you may feel shunned. Strong convictions can bring unpleasant consequences.

Throughout the Easter season our second readings will be taken from the Book of Revelation. But don't get your hopes up about hearing some of its most bizarre scenes. The lectionary filets the Book of Revelation and presents us its least controversial passages for the next several weeks. Still, these readings are beautiful and quite important.

Today we hear from the opening chapter. The writer's name is John. He is probably not the same John who wrote a gospel. This John has a vision on the island of Patmos. He sees a heavenly being in the midst of seven gold lampstands. He calls himself the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, the living one who once was dead. John is to write down the vision and send it to believers in seven different cities.

It's not clear what John was doing on Patmos. He simply says, "I found myself [there] because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus." He may have been there on mission. But most people assume he was exiled there, punished because of his convictions.

Last week we celebrated the baptism, confirmation and first communion of 8 people in the parish. This week and next we celebrate first communion for several more. In coming to communion, we all state our faith. The minister says, "The Body of Christ" and "The Blood of Christ," and we each respond, "Amen." That little "amen" is packed with meaning. It means, "Yes". It means, "I believe." It means, "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died and rose again, that he is the living one who once was dead, and that he is here, present in the sacrament of communion, body and blood, under the form of bread and wine." It's a strong statement, that little "amen". It calls for conviction, and conviction may bring unpleasant consequences with those who wish to compromise our values. But those consequences will be easier to endure because in communion Christ is at work within us. Whenever we face the difficulties

**of life – tough decisions, difficult choices, or unpleasant circumstances –
we will have strength to face them because of the conviction of our faith.**