

I want to begin with an incident from Njal's Saga, the most famous of the medieval Icelandic sagas. It's a tale of courage and treachery within the blood-feuds of tenth century Iceland. I won't give you the whole story, but due to a series of circumstances Njal's family home is surrounded by a hundred, armed enemies and the house is set on fire. Njal and most of his family die in the fire.

But one of Njal's sons-in-law, Kari Solmundarson, escapes by running along a burning beam, jumping over the ring of armed men, and disappearing into the night. Kari will take vengeance because Kari is an Alpha-Viking. In a culture that prized courage and skill in battle above all else, Kari is the toughest man in Iceland.

During Kari's time on the run from the "Burners," those who had burned down Njal's house, he comes to the farm of a man named Bjorn and his wife Valgerd. Valgerd holds her husband in disdain. Bjorn was known for talking big but running fast when trouble appeared – not the qualities Icelandic women valued in a

mate. They both knew who Kari is – everybody does. And here Kari makes an interesting request. He asks Bjorn to go with him on his flight from the Burners – “because I suspect you have great courage.” Bjorn agrees. But Valgerd says, “May trolls take your swaggering and strutting. You shouldn’t try to fool both yourself and Kari with such nonsense . . . don’t count on Bjorn for bravery, Kari, for I’m afraid he may not turn out to be as reliable as he claims.” Valgerd tells Bjorn, “If you let Kari down, you might as well know you’ll never come into my bed again.”

Long story short, Kari and Bjorn have two separate sword fights with the Burners. Kari tells Bjorn to stand behind him and not put himself forward but give him as much support as he could. And Bjorn does. He’s no hero, but, while not exposing himself too much does protect Kari’s back. Having momentarily escaped the Burners, Kari and Bjorn secretly return to Bjorn’s farm.

And here's the point of this long build-up. Imagine you're Bjorn. What will Kari say about you to Valgerd? Bjorn's whole future and reputation depend on it. Bjorn says to Kari, "Now you must be a true friend in the presence of my wife, for she won't believe a word I say, and this means a lot to me. Pay me back for the good support I've given you." "I will," said Kari. Then they rode up to the farm. Valgerd asks, "How did Bjorn turn out with you?" Kari answered, "Bare is the back of a botherless man. Bjorn turned out very well. He injured three men and was wounded himself. He was supportive of me in every way he could be."

"Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father." The testimony from Kari of Bjorn's prowess in battle means everything. From being a man mocked for his big talk and avoiding danger, scorned by women, he becomes the sword-brother of the greatest warrior in his

society. “Bare is the back of the botherless.” I use this Icelandic example in relation to Jesus’ point in the Gospel today. “Fear no one . . . do not be afraid.” Jesus is calling us to fight at His side in the battle of the Kingdom of God. Or, at least, to have His back, as Bjorn had Kari’s.

In our first reading the Prophet Jeremiah is attacked because he is prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem (unless it repents) due to its worship of false gods. The powerful people of the Kingdom don’t want to hear it, so he’s thrown down a well. Jeremiah needs courage to speak God’s word to the people.

So do we. The teachings of Christ’s Church are often not in line with popular and powerful opinions. In our society it can also take courage to speak the truth. This takes various forms depending on the situation or group we’re in. It could be challenging to speak out about an unjust war – or sharing our thoughts on immigrants. Others might find it more difficult to speak up about the right to life of

unborn children, or the sinfulness of sex outside of marriage, or the definition of marriage as being only between a man and woman. Or perhaps it isn't a particular teaching that confronts us with the dilemma of whether to stand with Christ, or not. Maybe it's the label of "Catholic" or "Christian" itself that will ostracize us.

Are we hiding our faith out of fear? This past Monday, I went to a World Cup match with Fr. Joseph. I planned on going in shorts and a T-shirt. It was going to be hot! But Fr. Joseph said we should go in our black clerical clothes. We could be good witnesses to people of the Catholic Church. I gave in and agreed. But, you know, it wasn't only the heat that gave me the idea of going undercover. I thought, "Do I want to open myself up to the looks and questions about the faith a clerical collar always brings?" I was avoiding the battle.

Do we have Jesus' back? It's not that He expects us to be perfect, or as courageous as He is. Remember, Kari came to Bjorn's farm, knowing he wasn't the bravest man. But he saw potential in

Bjorn, “I suspect you have great courage.” And Bjorn did what he needed to do – and rose in the eyes of all once he faced those swords and spears at Kari’s back.

That is also what Jesus asks of us. He sees more potential and moral courage in us than we imagine. At the end of our lives, we will each stand beside Jesus for our judgement (think here of Kari and Bjorn, at the end of their journey, entering Bjorn’s house and facing a skeptical Valgerd). Remember, “Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.” Will Jesus vouch for me? Have I stood up for my faith? Do I have Jesus’ back? Will He acknowledge me as His companion in the good fight - or not?