

12TH SUNDAY A 2008 JUNE 22, 2008

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JER. 20:10-13 ROM. 5:12-15

MATT. 10-26-33



When we think of Christian martyrs our minds undoubtedly go to the early centuries of the Christian era. We know that Paul was killed by the sword, and Peter was crucified up side down. We know that many died in the persecution of Diocletian. We might also be aware of other martyrs throughout the centuries dying for the faith in various areas of the world: like the Jesuit martyrs of North America, or the Catholic martyrs of Japan, or even those who died for the faith in Elizabethan England. But for most of us the age of martyrdom has long since past. A few years ago, however, a work by Robert Royal entitled *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History* appeared in book stores. Most of us would find the following statement quite shocking: “In absolute numbers, the century’s martyrs far surpasses those of any previous century...in a century that rightly prided itself on its scientific and technological advances on the one hand and its commitment to human rights on the other, refined methods of torture and control, physical and mental, also emerged with a vengeance all around the globe. As one of the deepest sources of opposition to oppressive tendencies, religion was a logical target for tyrants. The twentieth century, by any measure, presents a brutal spectacle that may be remembered historically as one of the darkest periods of martyrdom.” Why? How? In an age where communication has become so much easier and faster than in previous centuries, why are we so ignorant of the members of our faith dying for Christ? Where did this all happen? Well sometimes in places where we were half aware of it happening, and in other places where only historical research has discovered it. Think of Mexico, the Ukraine, Albania, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, Vietnam, Latin America, Korea, Africa and we could go on and on. In many places throughout the world the Church and belief in general has been attacked by the Nazis, by atheistic Communism, as well as other forms of anti-Catholicism to the point of the shedding of blood.

In our First Reading this morning from the *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* we have the prophet facing the ordinary fate of prophets in the Old Testament. The people of Israel are guilty of abandoning Yahweh in favor of the practice of idolatry, and refuse to listen to Jeremiah’s words. Instead, the people, the priests and even the king oppose and persecute

him. He is imprisoned, humiliated and in the end dies in exile. He is a martyr for his faith and is martyred by the people he has come to bring back to their God. This was typical fare for the prophets. The more they devoted themselves to carrying out God's will, the more the people and the authorities opposed them, and more often than not it led to their deaths.

In our short passage from Matthew's Gospel this morning, Jesus tells His Apostles three times not "to be afraid." This is part of the great discourse on mission in Matthew's Gospel which is intended not merely for the twelve but for all who put themselves at the service of the Gospel then, now and far into the future. Whoever proclaims the Good News should expect to be confronted with contradictions and persecution even to the point of violence. Just as Jesus' words found unwelcoming ears in those who saw His words and His actions as a threat to their power, the Good News still finds opposition in those whose values are contrary to His own. The Good News after all is good news only for those who wish to build their lives and their world on the love, compassion and concern of God for His people.

For nearly two thousand years the "Good News" of Christ has been proclaimed, and for those two thousand years has been both accepted and rejected. Jesus Himself told us that the Good News was like seed sown in a field, where it landed determined just how deeply the seeds took root, and how strong the resultant faith would be. For two thousand years many who claimed to accept Jesus and His values never had His roots penetrate to their hearts, and they were Christians in name only. Even today we all know how true that is. Men and women who seem to be the best of Christians on Sunday as they listen to the Lord's Word and even receive His Body and Blood, become ruthless on Monday when their true devotion not to Christ but to material gain becomes obvious.

Our age has sometimes been described as "post-Christian" in so far as what we once saw as the influence of Christianity in the western world and in everyday society seems to have been lost. But, maybe our world has always been "post-Christian." Maybe those who have accepted Christ and allowed Him to govern all aspects of their lives have never been large in number. And so, many have accepted the name Christian throughout the centuries, but how many have truly tried to "put on" Christ and live every day by His Law of Love?

We can understand how the twelve may have been fearful as the Lord sent them out to proclaim the Good News. Not everyone accepted Christ, and the authorities made their opposition known. If today the number of people who are truly Christian are not nearly as many as those who carry the name, then we might expect those who try to live by Christ's values to experience some fear as they try to live their lives among those who have not taken

Christ into their hearts. Christ, however, tells us not to fear, in fact in Mark's Gospel He tells us that "fear is useless" and what is needed is "faith". And so He says in today's Gospel, "What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light, what you hear whispered proclaim from the roof tops." Free of fear and placing their trust in God, Jesus calls His followers to boldly bear public witness to Him and to His message. Such witness makes it clear who is His follower in truth and who is merely a Christian in name.

The root meaning of "martyr" has nothing to do with dying for one's belief; it simply means "witness." In a very true sense then, anyone who witnesses to Christ is a martyr, and since all Christians are called to witness to Christ, all are called to be martyrs. We cannot, however, deny the fact of the hundred's of thousands, indeed the millions of Christians who have witnessed to Christ by the shedding of their blood. Equally true is the fact that as Christ tells us not to fear, He means fear anything even physical death.

Even as we consider the number of Christians who have died for their faith in the last century, the call to such a death for us seems foreign if not impossible. While our society and culture places little or no faith in God, it does not punish those who witness to such faith with physical death. The very fact that one might imitate Christ in love, compassion and forgiveness is in one sense punishment enough. It shows one to be not simply naive but stupid. Such "virtues" gain us nothing in this world. To act in such a way means that we make ourselves vulnerable to everyone for whom love, compassion and forgiveness are not values. It is an invitation to be taken advantage of.

We have all experienced this to some degree when we have opened our hearts to someone only to be rebuffed or betrayed, or when our forgiveness has been met not only by scorn but real harm.

Christ does not sugarcoat the reality that often awaits one if we choose to follow in His footsteps. We need only look at what happened to Him. But, Jesus also reminds us in today's Gospel that God cares for the smallest of sparrows and that we are more important to Him than all the sparrows. When we are most vulnerable God is there. As God was at Christ's side in all His suffering, and ultimately raised Him from the dead, God will be with us in every trial and difficulty. Simply, we are never alone, and are always given the strength we need to witness to the reality of Christ in our lives.

The question for us, however, is "Who do we wish to be?" Do we want to be the man and woman who come to church on Sunday, and then forget about Christ and their calling for the next six days, or do we want to be the man and the woman who allow the Christ they hear

about in Scripture, and whose body and blood mixes with their own to live in their words and their actions every day of the week? Do you, do I choose to witness to Christ? Do we choose to be His martyrs?