

St. Paul Miki and Companions

Introduction

In these violent days when people are being killed by beheading, burning, and even crucifixion, many because of their Christian faith, today's Scripture readings and our feast, St. Paul Miki and his companions, should have special resonance in our lives. What light does today's liturgy shed on our violent world and the role which we are to play in it?

Beheading of John the Baptist

Let us begin with St. Mark's account of the beheading of John the Baptist. John was in prison because he dared to call all people to repentance, not just ordinary people but even political leaders. Specifically, he reprimanded Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. In this way, John anticipated the admonition we heard this morning in Hebrews: "Let marriage be honored among all and the marriage bed be kept undefiled," lest one be condemned by God as an adulterer (Heb. 13:3). To say the least, John's prophetic words did not sit well with Herodias; but he was not afraid to tell the truth, no matter who he was talking to. Indeed, John also recognized that the behavior of political leaders had a powerful impact on the moral environment of the country at large.

John's prophetic defense of marriage cost him his head. Herodias made sure that Herod's birthday party became a banquet of death in which Herod's slide from debauchery, to rash oaths, to murder was made manifest. Yet even in this dark scene, the light of God's truth and love shine through. John's death foretells the death and resurrection of Jesus and the banquet of life, the Eucharist, of which we now take part.

St. Paul Miki

Let us now fast forward to the year 1597; the place, Nagasaki, Japan, a name which, even now, we find unsettling. Here we meet Paul Miki, a Japanese Jesuit missionary, formed by St. Francis Xavier, along with his twenty-five companions.

Not unlike John the Baptist, St. Paul and his fellow missionaries preached in a country where the rulers were inalterably opposed to the introduction of the

Christian faith. How often these courageous missionaries repeated today's psalm response: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; of whom should I be afraid?" (Ps. 27)

These men were witnesses to Jesus – disciples, prophets, missionaries – armed only with the attractiveness of the Gospel and hearts that were loving. Their preaching hit the mark; they won over many to the Faith. But like John, their witness cost them their lives. Paul was burned, others were crucified, but they were not defeated. Try as they might, Japan's rulers could not eradicate Christianity. They tried killing missionaries and then closing the country's borders for centuries. But when the borders were reopened in the 18th century, there were still covert Christians living in Japan. The blood of St. Paul and his companions was truly the seed of the Church.

Martyrdom Today

Today many people are being burned alive, beheaded, and crucified often because they are Christians who simply want to practice their faith and among the victims are numbered even children. The radical Islamic terrorists who engage in this bloody persecution seem intent on surpassing even themselves in cruelty. Truly we are living in an age of martyrs. We may never know the names of all who suffering and dying for their faith but we can be confident that their names are written in the Book of Life. Today we commend them to the intercession of St. John the Baptist and St. Paul Miki and his companions.

In other places, including the United States, a kind of white martyrdom is underway. It is true that in countries that regard themselves as free and democratic people are not dying violent deaths in witness to the faith, at least not yet. To echo the Letter to the Hebrews: "In [our] struggle against sin, [we] have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood" (Heb. 12:5). Yet those striving to be faithful to Jesus "may sometimes feel like a frightened boatful of disciples on the storm-tossed sea of a society that is often hostile to the Gospel. To be a committed Christian can often mean suffering condescension or hostility from friends or colleagues and exclusion from positions of influence in the world of education, culture, or politics" [Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 26] This is especially true with regard to the Church's defense of marriage and her teaching with regard to almost all matters touching human sexuality. Merely to mention them in public is to touch a third rail. More and

more these teachings are being characterized as hate speech and those who espouse them are being called “bigots”.

The Response of the Church

What is the primary response of the Church to all this? It is this: As the third Christian millennium dawned, the popes have “prophetically announced a new evangelization – a new mobilization to bring the good news to the ends of the earth – to revitalize the lukewarm and to introduce Jesus to those who have never met him” [Healy, *op. cit.*]. This is how we must understand the call of Pope Francis that we become missionary disciples, those who have allowed the Word of God so to penetrate our hearts that we can no longer keep it to ourselves, but instead bear witness to Christ, heedless of the cost, not unlike John the Baptist, not unlike Paul Miki and his companions.

No organization in the Church is better equipped for the new evangelization than the family of the Knights of Columbus, a world-wide fraternity, united in faith, whose first principle is charity. Again and again we are called by Father McGivney to engage in “a charity that evangelizes” – that touches people’s lives with God’s love and thus opens their hearts to his truth.

The Letter to the Hebrews urges us to ‘remember our leaders who spoke the word of God to us ... to consider their way of life and imitate their faith’ (Heb. 13:8). United in faith, united in service to one and in service to all, may we be steadfast, courageous, and joyful in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Heb. 13:8).