

6. February 2021

**“The victory of faith and love”
St. Paul Miki and Companions**

Gal 2:19-20 (Readings corresponding to the memorial)

In fact, through the Law I am dead to the Law so that I can be alive to God. I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitation of human nature, I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Mt 28:16-20

Meanwhile the eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

The Church is rich in martyrs in whom the victory of faith and love was accomplished. This is true of the Japanese blood witnesses Paul Miki and his companions.

The initially tolerant Japanese ruler increasingly turned against Christianity and in 1596 arrested twenty-six Christians in Osaka: 3 Japanese Jesuits, 6 Spanish Franciscans, among them Peter Baptist, and 17 Japanese Franciscan Tertiaries, i.e. lay people who belonged to the Third Order of St. Francis, including 3 altar boys aged 12 to 14. Japan was discovered by the Portuguese in 1542/43 and St Francis Xavier began missionising there in 1549. In 1590, there were about half a million Christians in Japan.

For these martyrs, probably no better passage from the reading and Gospel can be found. Both apply in perfection. Their faith was so strong that the Lord lived in them in such a way that they suffered terrible tortures and were finally crucified in Nagasaki after a long march of almost a thousand kilometres, which they had to cover barefoot through the snow.

During the long journey, they suffered much ridicule and scorn from the people along the way. In Nagasaki they went up a hill singing psalms and hymns, where they were tied to crosses that were erected in a line.

They held fast to the faith and all attempts to persuade them to deny the faith were in vain. Even the youngest held firm. The governor, who took pity on the youngest, wanted to save him from death and promised him everything possible to dissuade him from the faith. He received from him the answer: “The joys and honours of life are only like foam on the water, like morning dew on the grasses. The joys and honours of heaven, on the other hand, are everlasting.”

Paul Miki preached one last time to the people present, encouraging Christians to be steadfast and persevere. He forgave the murderers and thanked God for the grace of allowing him to die at the same age and like his Saviour, on the cross. There is no trace of fanaticism in these martyrs. Nor is there a hint of hatred. But also no fear, no doubts as to whether one had not perhaps placed one's faith in the wrong God. Rather, there is a great certainty and a serene joyfulness.

A contemporary reports about Paul Miki what he said to those present before his death: “Conscious of standing in high honour before the eyes of all those who had once belonged to him, our brother Paul Miki explained to the bystanders that he was Japanese and belonged to the Society of Jesus, that he had to die because of the preaching of the Gospel and that he thanked them for this extraordinary benefit. Then he added: 'Since it has now come to this with me, I think that none of you will believe of me that I am concealing the truth. I therefore declare to you all that there is no other way to salvation than that of the Christians. This way teaches me to forgive the enemies and all who have offended me. Therefore I gladly forgive the king and all who are guilty of my death, and I ask them to receive Christian baptism.' Then he turned his eyes to the companions and began to give them courage for the climax of this struggle. A glow of joy appeared on the face of all.”

This is mission at its perfection!

Despite all their wise adaptation to Japanese culture, there was never any doubt in the minds of the Jesuits of that time that the way of salvation is Christ alone. That is what they gave their lives for. This is an important message for today when this necessity of the Christian faith for salvation is no longer clearly proclaimed, even in the church.

If one has eyes to see and ears to hear, then one understands the message of a Saint Agnes, a Saint Agatha, and today of Paul Miki and his companions. It is called: readiness for martyrdom. Fidelity to the Lord and to the Gospel is above all. However, this is only possible through the spirit of strength, that wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit that takes us beyond our human limitations. Today, in an increasingly anti-Christian world, we are challenged to this witness and it is good to practise day by day to overcome all fears that stand in the way of a clear witness. This can only happen through a deepened love for Christ. It must take hold of us in such a way that it becomes “the love of our lives”, which we by no means deny. May the holy martyrs help and support us in this!