

20. July 2021

“Saint Margaret and the Prophet Elijah”

Sir 51: 1-8

'I shall give thanks to you, Lord and King, and praise you, God my Saviour, I give thanks to your name; for you have been my guard and support and redeemed my body from destruction, from the snare of the lying tongue, from lips that fabricate falsehood; in the presence of my assailants, you were on my side; you have been my support, you have redeemed me, true to your abounding kindness - and the greatness of your name - you liberated me from the fangs of those seeking to devour me, from the clutches of those seeking my life, from the many ordeals which I have endured, from the stifling heat which hemmed me in, from the heart of a fire which I had not kindled, from deep in the belly of Sheol, treacherous denunciations to the king. My soul has been close to death, my life had gone down to the brink of Sheol. I was completely surrounded, there was no one to help me; I looked for someone to help me, there was no one. Then I remembered your mercy, Lord, and your deeds from earliest times, how you deliver those who wait for you patiently, and save them from the clutches of their enemies.'

Many legends have grown up around the death of St. Margaret of Antioch. In any case, we would do well to understand first of all what the Lord wants to tell us through the testimony of the saints. The saints are stars in the sky of the Church, shining brightly and pointing the way forward for those of us who are still on pilgrimage in this world. Each individual saint is the story of God with a specific person, who knew how to correspond to his love.

This was also the case with Saint Margaret, whose martyrdom took place on 20 July 304 in Antioch. According to the Golden Legend, she was the daughter of a pagan priest. After the death of her mother, she was raised by a Christian wet nurse. When her father hinted at the tortures she would face if she did not worship the gods, Margaret replied: “Nothing can tear from my heart my faith in the one true God and in his Son Jesus Christ. I am ready to shed my blood for Jesus, just as He also gave His life for me; and I only wish that you too, my father, would acknowledge and worship the true God.”

Then her father denounced her to the prefect of the city. He fell in love with the beautiful maiden. But, being rejected by her, he took revenge with even greater torments, which she heroically endured. Her steadfastness in the face of torture and

the miracle that her wounds were healed caused the conversion of five thousand people, as the Golden Legend tells. These new converts were then beheaded along with Margaret.

Now, let us take a look at the holy Prophet Elijah, much venerated in the Carmelite Order and, above all, in the Eastern Church. The Old Testament tells us enough about his witness to understand the difficult position he had as a prophet. Elijah proclaimed the Will of God and was not afraid to confront the king. What he did on Mount Carmel is a shining example of his zeal for God (cf. 1 Kgs 18:20-40).

True zeal for God is by no means extremist; rather, it was up to Elijah to lead the people, who were about to follow the false prophets, back to God. Only those who know, at least partially, what it means for a person to fall into the devil's trap, are willing to carry out even the most difficult of God's commissions. Elijah was one of them!

Now, what do St. Margaret and St. Elijah have in common? Their unconditional love for God, which made them able to endure with God's grace all that befell them: Margaret, in the strength and integrity of her virginity, as a witness of the true faith; Elijah, in his mission as a prophet of the true God. Both had to undergo the sufferings of the threat of death. In the case of Marguerite, she suffered martyrdom. In the case of the Prophet Elijah, he had to flee from the fury of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab (cf. 1 Kgs 19:1-4).

We Christians would do well to consider these saints as our brothers and helpers. They are not just a distant role model; they are living people, who have reached their goal and whose great desire is to assist the Church militant in its journey. We should not merely admire them from afar, and perhaps think: "Well, they were saints; but we will never make it". Certainly both Margaret and the Prophet Elijah would reply, "It was the grace of God that sustained us. We could never have made it on our own. We are also weak like you!"

Perhaps they would bring to mind the reading we heard today, which also describes what happened in their lives:

"In the presence of my assailants, you were on my side; you have been my support, you have redeemed me, true to your abounding kindness - and the greatness of your name - you liberated me from the fangs of those seeking to devour me, from the clutches of those seeking my life."

And, above all, they would insist that *"Then I remembered your mercy, Lord, and your deeds from earliest times, how you deliver those who wait for you patiently, and save them from the clutches of their enemies."*

That could be their message to us!