

17. November 2021

Incredible bravery

2 Macc 7:1,20-31

It also happened that seven brothers were arrested with their mother. The king tried to force them to taste some pork, which the Law forbids, by torturing them with whips and scourges. But the mother was especially admirable and worthy of honourable remembrance, for she watched the death of seven sons in the course of a single day, and bravely endured it because of her hopes in the Lord. Indeed she encouraged each of them in their ancestral tongue; filled with noble conviction, she reinforced her womanly argument with manly courage, saying to them, 'I do not know how you appeared in my womb; it was not I who endowed you with breath and life, I had not the shaping of your every part. And hence, the Creator of the world, who made everyone and ordained the origin of all things, will in his mercy give you back breath and life, since for the sake of his laws you have no concern for yourselves.' Antiochus thought he was being ridiculed, suspecting insult in the tone of her voice; and as the youngest was still alive he appealed to him not with mere words but with promises on oath to make him both rich and happy if he would abandon the traditions of his ancestors; he would make him his Friend and entrust him with public office. The young man took no notice at all, and so the king then appealed to the mother, urging her to advise the youth to save his life. After a great deal of urging on his part she agreed to try persuasion on her son. Bending over him, she fooled the cruel tyrant with these words, uttered in their ancestral tongue, 'My son, have pity on me; I carried you nine months in my womb and suckled you three years, fed you and reared you to the age you are now, and provided for you. I implore you, my child, look at the earth and sky and everything in them, and consider how God made them out of what did not exist, and that human beings come into being in the same way. Do not fear this executioner, but prove yourself worthy of your brothers and accept death, so that I may receive you back with them in the day of mercy.' She had hardly finished, when the young man said, 'What are you all waiting for? I will not comply with the king's ordinance; I obey the ordinance of the Law given to our ancestors through Moses. As for you, who have contrived every kind of evil against the Hebrews, you will certainly not escape the hands of God.'

After the shining example of Eleazar in yesterday's reading, who in his old age was unwilling to disown God, we meet today a mother and her seven children, who faced a cruel death with incredible courage and steadfastness. Neither were they willing to

disobey God, and so they left for all generations the radiant example of their love for the Lord.

One never tires of hearing the mother's admirable words! In the face of the suffering of her children, who were being killed before her very eyes - which is normally unbearable for a mother - she clings to her faith in God and even strengthens her children in their decision to accept death. This mother deeply understood that her children do not belong to her; life comes from God. The glorious death of her children for God's sake was of more value to her than their continued presence at her side as traitors of the Law. Moreover, she professes her faith in the resurrection of the dead, which is her hope to be reunited with her children.

Already in the story of Eleazar that we heard yesterday, we can find a key that will help us to understand how it is that this brave woman and her children were able to endure such physical torments. This clue is also found in the stories of so many martyrs, among whom we also find mothers who were proud that their children suffered martyrdom for the sake of Christ. We heard in yesterday's reading:

"Eleazar, about to die by force of blows, said between sighs: 'Well does the Lord, who possesses holy wisdom, know that, being able to deliver me from death, I endure in my body the cruel pains of scourging, and suffer them gladly in my soul out of respect for him.'"

In such a martyrdom, the Lord allows the body to suffer, but the soul is strengthened from within. It is in accordance with the Will of God, so that the Lord will also have special pity on it. In this context, we can recall Jesus himself, who, in the midst of his agony in Gethsemane, was comforted by an angel (cf. Lk 22:43).

These magnificent examples should encourage us when suffering comes upon us for God's sake, so that we are not paralysed with fear. Perhaps we can apply to the situation of suffering that threatens us those words that the Lord spoke in another context.

"You will be seized and persecuted; you will be handed over to the synagogues and to imprisonment, and brought before kings and governors for the sake of my name -and that will be your opportunity to bear witness. Make up your minds not to prepare your defence, because I myself shall give you an eloquence and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to resist or contradict."
(Lk 21:12-15).

We could also apply this to the situation of suffering: If we have to suffer for the Lord's sake, He will give us the strength to endure it... This is an important perspective for times of persecution, which are perhaps not so far away from us or have already arrived.

Let us trust in the Lord, that He will strengthen our souls in a special way when we find ourselves in such situations!