



29. August 2022

Memory of the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist Human respects

Jer 1:17-19

In those days, I received this word from the Lord: 'Have no fear of them and in their presence I will make you fearless. For look, today I have made you into a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze to stand against the whole country: the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests and the people of the country. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you, Yahweh declares, to rescue you.'

Today the Church presents us with a luminary, a man of firm faith: St. John the Baptist. He, whom Jesus calls "*the greatest of those born of women*" (cf. Lk 7:28), boldly proclaimed God's commandments, even to the powerful, knowing full well that in doing so he was putting his own life at risk (cf. Mk 6:18). Today's Gospel recounts the wicked events that led to the beheading of St. John (Mk 6:17-29).

But where did St. John get the strength to act in this way? We might ask ourselves the same question when we see that whole "cloud of witnesses", made up of men who bore witness to God and were ready even to sacrifice their own lives (cf. Rev 12:11). In our day too, we hear numerous testimonies of admirable Christians who fearlessly testify to their faith and would rather give their lives than deny the Lord. The Church is aware that, as Tertullian said, "*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians*".

But, to return to the question: where does this strength come from for the martyrs? It is the spirit of fortitude, which the Holy Spirit grants to those who faithfully follow the Lord and do not allow themselves to be carried away by human respects.

Human respects, on the other hand, limit us and bind us to ourselves. Under their influence, one may fear that the gospel message, the defence of the truth or the profession of faith in Jesus could bring disadvantages. Or it may be that, deep down, we seek to be liked and recognised by men, which is why we become incapable of saying anything that might sound unfavourable. If John the Baptist, the apostles or their successors had acted in this way, the gospel would never have reached us. It must

be said clearly! When we act out of human respect, our own person is more important to us than the Lord himself.

Even in our time, even if we do not find ourselves in a situation as dramatic as that of St. John or the martyrs, we often have to overcome human respects in defending the Christian message and the values that flow from it.

It is certainly right that we should proclaim the truth in love, so that our disordered passions do not hinder the reception of the Gospel by those who listen to us. However, we can never be silent about the truth!

Political correctness" - the so-called "mainstream" - which also manifests itself in members of the Church, only accepts those elements of the gospel that are in line with their own ideas. On the other hand, when the gospel questions or condemns what the world does, then supposed tolerance can quickly turn into hostility and rejection.

In view of the wonderful witness of St. John the Baptist, we should be aware that we too may one day be faced with extremely difficult situations, in which we must stand by our 'yes' to Christ. If the 'mainstream' becomes more and more aggressive - and there are indications that it will - our witness will become even more necessary, for the spirit of the world will seek to silence us.

We should therefore be prepared and ask for the gift of fortitude now, so that we can bear witness to the fact that proclaiming the truth is more important than being recognised by men. In that sense, we should begin to perceive when our human thoughts or feelings are not in accordance with the gospel; we should begin to discover our weaknesses, where we are ready to make false concessions and give too much importance to 'what people will say'. We must consistently strive to overcome these weaknesses!

St. John the Baptist and all the apostles are not only models of firm faith for us; they are also our brothers in heaven, who are certainly ready to help us when trials come our way.