

30. January 2023

The world was not worthy of them

Heb 11:32-40

Brothers, what more shall I say? There is not time for me to give an account of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, or of David, Samuel and the prophets. These were men who through faith conquered kingdoms, did what was upright and earned the promises. They could keep a lion's mouth shut, put out blazing fires and emerge unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength to be brave in war and drive back foreign invaders. Some returned to their wives from the dead by resurrection; and others submitted to torture, refusing release so that they would rise again to a better life. Some had to bear being pilloried and flogged, or even chained up in prison. They were stoned, or sawn in half, or killed by the sword; they were homeless, and wore only the skins of sheep and goats; they were in want and hardship, and maltreated. They were too good for the world and they wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and ravines. These all won acknowledgement through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had made provision for us to have something better, and they were not to reach perfection except with us.

What heroic testimonies of faith and suffering the Apostle lists here! They are those of whom the world was not worthy...

Here the Apostle establishes the true hierarchy of values that counts before God. Of what use are the vanities of this world; of what use are its honours, its false splendour and glitter? "*Vanity of vanities!*" -thus Qoheleth rightly describes all these passing things (Eccl 1:2). Just one of these men of faith mentioned in the reading is worth more than the whole world that has turned away from God. Indeed, the latter is not even worthy of such a witness.

We could also see this in the radioplay about St Agnes (<http://en.elijamission.net/2023/01/18/>). The purity of this young girl eclipsed the entire Roman environment, which was not worthy of her. What an abysmal difference between her and those others who were not even willing to recognise the miracles that

were happening before their very eyes! Her hair enveloped Agnes, protecting her from impure gazes; the fire could not harm her... But even these obvious signs could not prevent those hardened hearts from wanting to extinguish the testimony of Christ. What blindness!

St Agnes also "subdued a kingdom", to put it in the terms used in today's reading. Her innocence and her courage of faith unmasked a dominion that only knew how to rely on brute force; a dominion that had closed its heart to the presence of God in Agnes, just as in her time the Pharisees had done to Jesus.

Surely, Christ's victory is unlike the victories we know in the world. It is not physical strength that triumphs; but, as in the examples mentioned in today's text and in the story of St. Agnes, it is faith. Faith is the power that overcomes the world (cf. 1Jn 5:4b). Often it is precisely what appears weak on the outside that wins the victory: *"God chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong"* (1 Cor 1:27).

Today, we are increasingly surrounded by an environment hostile to faith and our witness requires more and more courage; courage to confess Christ and all the values that derive from our faith. An environment hostile to the faith will not rest until it labels Christians as "enemies of humanity", in order to have a justification for persecuting them.

The great and powerful Rome against the virgin Agnes! Was she a threat to Rome? Yes, insofar as she testified that the works of the world are evil (cf. Jn 7:7); and no, insofar as she prayed for her enemies, because in her shines the loving Heart of God, who wants to forgive (cf. Lk 23:34).

Yes, the world is not worthy of God's witnesses. And yet God does not abandon people.

In the traditional form of the Holy Mass we pray three times before receiving communion: *"Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof..."* The certainty that we ourselves are not worthy to receive the Lord must penetrate deeply into us. But we also emphasise with a triple repetition that it is He who heals our soul: *"...but only say the word and my soul shall be healed"*. It is Jesus who renews our dignity,

which we have wounded so deeply through sin. In Jesus we can rise up as children of God and overcome the world (cf. Jn 16:33), as our brothers in faith did before us.

No! The world, by itself, is not worthy of the saints....

Therefore it is the incomparable love of our heavenly Father who does not turn his back on it, but continues to seek the people in this world, so that the filthy garment of sin may be transformed, washed in the blood of the Lamb, into a wedding garment for the wedding feast (cf. Rev 7:14). The witnesses of faith point the way for us!