

29. August 2023

Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist

Jer 1:17-19

Reading corresponding to the memorial of the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist

In those days, I received this word from the Lord: Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak to them all that I command thee. Be not afraid at their presence: for I will make thee not to fear their countenance. For behold I have made thee this day a fortified city, and a pillar of iron, and a wall of brass, over all the land, to the kings of Juda, to the princes thereof, and to the priests, and to the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee, and shall not prevail: for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.

We all know the courageous testimony John the Baptist gave before the king, making him see that his relationship with Herodias was contrary to God's will. Herod, who, on the one hand, had a hidden admiration for the prophet, while, on the other hand, rejected his message and was influenced by Herodias, finally had the Baptist killed. Prior to this act, his senses had been intoxicated by the beauty of Herodias' daughter, and he had made her a fatal promise to fulfil her wish, whatever it might be. We know how the story ended, and we can hear it again in today's Gospel (cf. Mk 6:17-29). John the Baptist became a witness to the truth, just as Jeremiah had been before him.

Today, truth does not enjoy great prestige in public life... One can hardly find anyone who still dares to pronounce it clearly. On the contrary, it seems that nowadays everything is justified and everything is relativised. "Politically correct opinion" has succeeded in silencing practically all clear statements, or labelling them as "too extreme". And since no one wants to be labelled as extremist or exaggerated, silence is preferred. It is a system that indirectly exerts psychological violence and whose scope of action is growing more and more. It even wants to silence the prophetic voice of the Church, or, at least, to limit it to speak only on those topics that are socially accepted, that are "politically correct" and go with the flow...

Let's put it concretely: Let's imagine that a person with a high position in the Church goes to a Catholic politician and tells him that he is not allowed to live with another

woman, while his wife, with whom he is legitimately married, is still alive. This person would probably suffer a "media execution". But would he receive support from the Church, would there be a bishop or two who would take his side? Probably only by very few, if any!

We can see this also with regard to the reception of Holy Communion. In the United States there are some courageous bishops who refuse to give communion to politicians who openly support abortion. But they are very few! They are imitators of the Baptist or a Jeremiah.

It is the same situation of John the Baptist; it is the same reason why he gave his life, bearing witness to the universal validity of God's commandments! This testimony is still valid today and is for us an example of a fearless defence of the truth. Herod, on the other hand, or others who, like him, did not remain faithful to God's commandments, are practically a "negative example" of how not to act.

The words we hear in today's reading, addressed to the prophet Jeremiah and rightly applied to the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, can be taken as an exhortation to be witnesses to the truth. In fact, we Christians do not defend our own truth, but the truth entrusted to us by the One who is Truth itself (cf. Jn 14:6). To serve this truth is a holy duty and the highest honour! It is the "*pillar of iron*" and the "*wall of brass*"! Anyone who opposes this truth will sooner or later fall. If we imitate Jeremiah and John the Baptist, holding firmly to the truth, we too will become "*pillars of iron*" and "*walls of brass*" against the dominion of lies and deception.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind the Lord's warning to Jeremiah: "*Do not be afraid of their presence*".

That means for us: Do not be afraid of the "spirit of the age"; also when it infiltrates the Church itself, relativising the truth and not wanting to listen to it.

In our time, it is certainly a particular challenge to stand firm in the truth and to resist all the "siren voices", which want to "reconcile" us with the spirit of the world and thus weaken our Catholic identity. Of course we must not use the truth entrusted to us as if it were a sword with which we could strike blows right and left, following the impulses

of our temperament, which is probably not yet fully purified! But, yes, the proclamation of truth is a task we cannot avoid.

The knowledge of the truth entails an inner commitment, which is to listen to this truth and to consciously place oneself at its service. This is what John the Baptist teaches us, as well as many other confessors. For truth is not a private matter; it is not a secret knowledge reserved only for a few "initiates". We, who by God's grace were able to encounter this truth, are at its service, just as John the Baptist, the prophet Jeremiah and so many other witnesses, each according to the specific vocation that God directs him.