

19. September 2023

Looking forward to eternity

Hb 10:32-36

Reading corresponding to the memorial of St. Januarius

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Today the church commemorates Saint Gennaro, Bishop of Benevento. During the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian, he was thrown to the wild beasts together with his deacon Festus, the lector Desiderius and some other Christians. As the beasts did not harm him, he was finally beheaded. To this day, the so-called "miracle of Saint Gennaro" is repeated every 19th January in Naples: the relic of his blood, normally a mass of dried blood preserved in a glass ampoule, becomes completely liquid.

The Church rightly commemorates and honours the holy martyrs who gave their lives for the faith. Their feasts are a constant reminder of their witness, sealed by their blood. Greater love has no one than to lay down one's life for the Lord, imitating Him who gave His life for our salvation. The martyrs are the great witnesses of a love that triumphs, that does not cling to its life to the extent of fearing death (cf. Rev 12:11), but falls to the ground like a grain of wheat in order to bear much fruit, as the Gospel tells us today in commemoration of this martyr (Jn 12:24-26).

In addition to the martyrdom of blood for the sake of faith, which is its classic expression, there are many other forms of suffering for the Lord, from which we are not exempt even today. Many Jews who, enlightened by God, recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah, suffered various forms of persecution at the hands of other Jews. The reading from the book of Hebrews alludes to some of these, and also shows how they were able to endure them:

"you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

From this we can draw a lesson from the Word of God. When calamities befall us for the sake of faith, we must turn our gaze to eternity so as not to lose confidence. In following Christ, it is important that we never lose sight of the goal, and that from this perspective we always receive the strength to endure whatever comes our way.

There is a danger of our vision becoming too caught up in this world, so that we easily adopt its mentality. But this is not what Scripture teaches us (e.g. Romans 12:2). Rather, we need to keep our eyes on the prize in order to be reasonable, and to think of eternity in order to be motivated again and again to get up and continue on the path to which we are all called.

The Apostle to the Gentiles exhorts us today to persevere: not to give up, not to give in, to accept the struggles and to fight them in union with the Lord.

The way of following Christ, even if it has a different nuance according to the specific vocation of each one, does not consist in knowledge or in dialogue with the world. Rather, it consists in imitating the Lord, who came into this world but is not of it. This is what He asks of His Father in the priestly prayer:

"I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn 17:15-16).

It would be an illusion to think that the more we conform to the world, the more fruitful our ministry will be. On the contrary! The more we resemble the Lord and focus on eternity, the more we will be able to understand the ways of the world in the light of God and face them in the right way. When Jesus came into the world and became like us in all things except sin, He did not conform Himself to the world's mentality, which is contrary to God.

The Church must not degenerate into a mere institution representing a certain religious world view. On the contrary, it must always renew itself from its head, not following the proposals of a world that is far from God, but following the Holy Spirit. It must

allow itself to be guided and enlightened by the Spirit of God, and not be infiltrated and weakened by a worldly spirit which is also becoming increasingly anti-Christian.

The words of today's reading sound almost strange in a Church increasingly focused on secular issues. But the problem is not with St Paul and his statements. Rather, they show us where our faith lies.