

1. November 2023
Solemnity of All Saints

Rev 7:2-4, 9-14

I, John, saw another angel rising where the sun rises, carrying the seal of the living God; he called in a powerful voice to the four angels whose duty was to devastate land and sea, 'Wait before you do any damage on land or at sea or to the trees, until we have put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.' And I heard how many had been sealed: a hundred and forty-four thousand, out of all the tribes of Israel. After that I saw that there was a huge number, impossible for anyone to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language; they were standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands. They shouted in a loud voice, 'Salvation to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels who were standing in a circle round the throne, surrounding the elders and the four living creatures, prostrated themselves before the throne, and touched the ground with their foreheads, worshipping God with these words: Amen. Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour and power and strength to our God for ever and ever. Amen. One of the elders then spoke and asked me, 'Who are these people, dressed in white robes, and where have they come from?' I answered him, 'You can tell me, sir.' Then he said, 'These are the people who have been through the great trial; they have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb.'

The holy angels seal those of the people of Israel who did not bow their knees to the Baals and showed faithfulness to the Lord in all persecutions. In the Book of Kings, the number of seven thousand in Israel is mentioned (1 Kgs 19:18)... When the Prophet Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel, he thought he was the only one left as a prophet. But the Lord lets him know that there are more who have not forsaken the true God: there is a remnant of seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed their knees to Baal, a "holy remnant", just as there was in Israel with regard to Jesus, while the great part of the people did not accept His message!

Further on, today's reading shows us that great multitude of people, who, coming from all nations, acknowledged God and remained faithful to Him. They withstood all persecutions and trials and give glory to God. The Church has chosen this text from the book of Revelation to celebrate the great multitude of the saints; that countless number of faithful souls known only to God.

As I internalise this biblical text, I am reminded of the times I was able to spend in the Holy Land and remember the multitude of people who came day after day from the most diverse nations, to honour the Lord and, in some way, to come into contact with Him. It was like a reflection of what we heard in today's reading. Many pilgrims in Jerusalem prostrated themselves before the "Throne of the Lamb" - which on Golgotha is the Cross of the Lord - and worshipped Him. This was particularly palpable in the early morning hours inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, at the venerable site of Golgotha, where the Lord gave His life for the Redemption of the world. In silence, people lined up before the Cross of Jesus. Each one bent down under the altar to touch the rock of Golgotha with his or her own hands, thus making a gesture of adoration to the Lord. It was a very moving sight! Some tears were visible and sometimes there were sobs, but, as they met the true King of hearts, there was also a gleam in their eyes and a certain mutual understanding, wherever they came to worship Him. Whether poor or rich; whether in an important position or a simple pilgrim: they all worship the same Lord! Not even the prelates and hierarchs of the Church stood out in the midst of the crowds of pilgrims in Jerusalem. All earthly things take second place to Jesus on the Cross: it is the Lord to whom we give praise!

Today's Solemnity text makes it clear that those who wear white robes are those who have come out of the great trial. What trial is this referring to, for Holy Scripture repeatedly speaks of tribulation and affliction?

As for the Jews, certainly their deportation to Babylon in 586 B.C., as well as the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., can be considered a great trial.

In general, all the faithful suffer tribulation, both from attacks from without and from within, against which they have to defend themselves.

We also know of the great persecutions that the faithful have suffered under political systems of injustice, such as Nazism and Communism in various nations, which gave power to those anti-Christian dictators who cruelly persecuted Jews and Christians.

But the "great trial" referred to in today's text can also encompass a great anti-Christian persecution that will befall the faithful in the End Times; a trial that will even have to be shortened by the Lord, because of the cruelty of the persecution (Mk 13:20). In this time there will be many martyrs, although the text does not seem to refer only to those who physically shed their blood; but to all those who remain faithful in the time of the great trial and are washed with the blood of the Lamb.

Regardless of the type of trials we face, we must be prepared for the fight and hold fast to the faith. To do this, we must be aware that tribulation does not only come from the temptations that beset us, whether from within ourselves or from the seductions of the world. Already now we can see how in some countries the Christian faith is being increasingly marginalised and even openly persecuted. And this situation may become even more acute!

Sobriety and vigilance will prevent us from closing our eyes to the growing dangers or minimising them. Rather, we must put our trust in the Lord and ask Him for the strength to remain faithful to Him in all tribulations. For this, we should ask for the concrete help of all the saints, who, in God's strength, were victorious in all their trials.