

6. February 2023

## The victory of faith and love

*Mt 28:16-20*

*Gospel corresponding to the memory of St. Paul Miki and companions*

*Meanwhile the eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'*

The Church is rich in missionaries and martyrs in whom the victory of faith and love was accomplished. This is true of the Japanese blood witnesses Paul Miki and his companions, whose memorial day we celebrate today.

In 1542-1543 the Portuguese had discovered Japan and in 1549 St. Francis Xavier had begun his missionary work there. Thus, in 1590 there were approximately half a million Christians in Japan.

The initially tolerant Japanese ruler increasingly turned against Christianity and in 1596 arrested twenty-six Christians in Osaka: 3 Japanese Jesuits, 6 Spanish Franciscans, among them Peter Baptist, and 17 Japanese Franciscan Tertiaries, i.e. lay people who belonged to the Third Order of St. Francis, including 3 altar boys aged 12 to 14.

The faith of these men was so strong that it made them capable of suffering terrible torments. After a long march of almost a thousand kilometers, which they had to walk barefoot in the snow, they were crucified in Nagasaki. During the long journey they had to suffer much mockery and scorn from the people who came out to see them on the way. In Nagasaki they went up a hill singing psalms and hymns, where they were tied to crosses that were erected in a line.

They held fast to the faith and all attempts to persuade them to deny the faith were in vain. Even the youngest held firm. The governor, who took pity on the youngest, wanted to save him from death and promised him everything possible to dissuade him from the faith. He received from him the answer: “The joys and honours of life are only like foam on the water, like morning dew on the grasses. The joys and honours of heaven, on the other hand, are everlasting.”

Paul Miki preached one last time to the people present, encouraging Christians to be steadfast and persevere. He forgave the murderers and thanked God for the grace of allowing him to die at the same age and like his Saviour, on the cross.

A contemporary reports about Paul Miki what he said to those present before his death: “Conscious of standing in high honour before the eyes of all those who had once belonged to him, our brother Paul Miki explained to the bystanders that he was Japanese and belonged to the Society of Jesus, that he had to die because of the preaching of the Gospel and that he thanked them for this extraordinary benefit. Then he added: 'Since it has now come to this with me, I think that none of you will believe of me that I am concealing the truth. I therefore declare to you all that there is no other way to salvation than that of the Christians. This way teaches me to forgive the enemies and all who have offended me. Therefore I gladly forgive the king and all who are guilty of my death, and I ask them to receive Christian baptism.' Then he turned his eyes to the companions and began to give them courage for the climax of this struggle. A glow of joy appeared on the face of all.”

Despite all their wise adaptation to Japanese culture, there was never any doubt in the minds of the Jesuits of that time that the way of salvation is Christ alone. That is what they gave their lives for. This is an important message for the present time, when the necessity of Christian faith for salvation is often no longer clearly announced.

Fidelity to the Lord and to the Gospel is above all. . This implies a willingness even to martyrdom, which becomes possible thanks to the spirit of fortitude; that marvelous gift of the Holy Spirit that takes us beyond our human limitations.

Today, in an increasingly anti-Christian world, we are challenged to bear this witness. We should train ourselves, day by day, to overcome all the fears that could prevent us from giving this clear witness. This can only happen through a deepened love for Christ.

It must take hold of us in such a way that it becomes “the love of our lives”, which we by no means deny. May the holy martyrs help us and support us, so that we may be worthy of imitating the example of a Saint Agnes, Saint Agatha and the holy martyrs of Nagasaki!