

20. July 2023

## St. Margaret and the Prophet Elijah

Sir 51:1-8

Reading corresponding to the memorial of St. Margaret of Antioch

*A prayer of Jesus the son of Sirach. I will give glory to thee, O Lord, O King, and I will praise thee, O God my Saviour. I will give glory to thy name: for thou hast been a helper and protector to me. And hast preserved my body from destruction, from the snare of an unjust tongue, and from the lips of them that forge lies, and in the sight of them that stood by, thou hast been my helper. And thou hast delivered me, according to the multitude of the mercy of thy name, from them that did roar, prepared to devour. Out of the hands of them that sought my life, and from the gates of afflictions, which compassed me about: From the oppression of the flame which surrounded me, and in the midst of the fire I was not burnt. From the depth of the belly of hell, and from an unclean tongue, and from lying words, from an unjust king, and from a slanderous tongue: My soul shall praise the Lord even to death.*

Many legends have grown up around the death of St. Margaret of Antioch, whom we commemorate today. In any case, we would do well to understand first of all what the Lord wants to tell us through the witness of the saints. The saints are stars in the heaven of the Church, shining brightly and pointing the way forward for those of us who are still on pilgrimage in this world. Each saint in particular is the story of God with a specific person, who knew how to correspond to His love.

This was also the case with St. Margaret, whose martyrdom took place on July 20, 304 in Antioch. According to the Golden Legend, she was the daughter of a pagan priest. After the death of her mother, she was raised by a Christian wet nurse. When her father hinted at the tortures she would have to face if she did not worship the gods, Margaret replied: "Nothing can tear from my heart my faith in the one true God and in His Son Jesus Christ. I am ready to shed my blood for Jesus, just as He also gave His life for me; and I only wish that you too, my father, would acknowledge and worship the true God."

Then her father denounced her to the prefect of the city. The latter fell in love with the beautiful maiden. But, being rejected by her, he took revenge with even greater

torments, which she heroically endured. Her steadfastness in the face of torture and the miracle that her wounds were healed caused the conversion of five thousand people, according to the Golden Legend. These new converts were then beheaded along with Margaret.

Now, let us take a look at the holy Prophet Elijah, much venerated in the Carmelite Order and, above all, in the Eastern Church. The Old Testament tells us enough about his witness to understand the difficult position he held as a prophet. Elijah announced the Will of God and was not afraid to confront the king himself. What he did on Mount Carmel is a shining example of his zeal for God (cf. 1 Kings 18:20-40).

True zeal for God is by no means extremist; rather, Elijah's intention was to bring back to God the People of Israel, who were about to follow the false prophets. Only those who know - at least in broad strokes - what it means for a person to fall into the devil's trap, are willing to carry out even the most difficult of God's assignments. Elijah knew this!

Now then: What do St. Margaret and St. Elijah have in common? Their unconditional love for God, which made them capable of enduring with the grace of God all the persecutions that befell them: Margaret in the strength and integrity of her virginity, being a witness of the true faith; Elijah in his mission as a prophet of the true God. Both had to undergo the sufferings of the threat of death: in the case of Margaret, suffering martyrdom; in the case of the Prophet Elijah, having to flee constantly from the fury of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab (cf. 1 Kings 19:1-4).

We Christians would do well to consider these saints as our brothers and helpers. They are not only distant role models; they are living persons, who have reached their goal and whose great desire is to assist the Church militant in her journey. We should not merely admire them from afar and, at the same time, perhaps think: "Well, they were saints; but we will never make it." Certainly both Margaret and the Prophet Elijah would answer us, "It was the grace of God that sustained us. We could never have made it on our own; we too are weak like you!"

Perhaps they would bring to mind the reading we heard today, which describes what happened in their lives: *"Thou hast delivered me, according to the multitude of the mercy of thy name, from them that did roar, prepared to devour."*

And, above all, they would insist that *"I will give glory to thy name: for thou hast been a helper and protector to me."*

That could be their message to us!