

ALL SAINTS OF BRITAIN AND NEW MARTYRS OF GREECE

Yesterday we celebrated the Nativity of the Holy, Glorious Prophet Forerunner and Baptist John and in the service was read the remarkable account of his birth to Zechariah, the High Priest for the year, and his wife, Elizabeth when they were 'getting on in years' to quote the text. The latter rejoiced according to the account in Luke's gospel because of 'what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people'. Sterility for a woman was a source of great shame in those times, as it still is in parts of the world today, when the inability to procreate is blamed on the woman even when the source of the problem lies with the male. In those times, when we can recall the Patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah having similar problems because the ability to have children and large families was considered a sign of God's blessing, we can imagine the depth of inferiority that she endured from other women. And this news announced by the archangel Gabriel to Zechariah in Luke chapter 1 comes also with an unimaginable blessing from God. "You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great in the sight of the Lordwith the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before Him" i.e. Christ. When he is born he goes into the wilderness until the day he appears publicly to Israel announcing the coming of the Messiah as promised, and calling on all to repent and receive baptism in the waters of Jordan as a sign of this inner change. We are told that his fame reached the ears of Herod the King who would gladly hear him even though John denounced him for his adultery and evil acts. As we all know his life ended suddenly when he was called from his prison cell and beheaded to satisfy Herodias his brother's wife whom he had taken as his own.

The Nativity and subsequent martyrdom of John is not the only event we celebrate this weekend. Today we recall all the saints of Britain, the new martyrs of Greece under the Turkish occupation during a period of five hundred years and the new martyrs and confessors of Bulgaria. On Thursday we celebrated the Protomartyr or first martyr of Britain, St Alban, who gave his name to the city in Hertfordshire and who is buried in the cathedral. Some years ago I went to celebrate the Liturgy on his feast day in the cathedral and during the procession from the small chapel to the shrine and I could feel the saint's presence with us as we celebrated his glorious death. If you are not familiar with the story of his life, do look him up on Wikipedia on your computers when you go home. He is a most inspiring saint who gave his life for a Christian priest who came to his house for refuge under the persecution of Christians by the Romans. Personally I would prefer to see him as the patron saint of England.

St John in his gospel says that we show our love for God by keeping his commandments and if we do this and keep Christ's words He and the Father will come and make his home in us for such is his will. The text which we have just read about keeping the eye sound and the body full of light is pivotal to how we live our lives and especially to how he with the Father can come to dwell increasingly with us. The Kingdom of Heaven must come first in all our calculations and actions, firstly to enable us to see the will of God and secondly to enable it to be fulfilled more expediently. Christ's words highlight two things as real dangers, which can deflect us from our path in a major or minor way: putting material things first and worry. Jesus says the second is the source of the first; worry about material things produces an over-emphasis on them, which in a secret and subtle way draws us away from the will of God and our peace in Him. St Silouan of Mount Athos writes that any feeling of worry shows that we have ceased to rest in the will of God. He reasons like this: when we are in the will of God because we are at home, we are even ready to endure all kinds of afflictions. When we receive some kind of affliction which we cannot deal with ourselves we naturally pray to God with all our hearts asking him to remove it. If he does not, then it is clear that he has sent it for our salvation and we should strive to accept it. This brings us closer into the will of God. How disarmingly clear the analysis is and how hard to put it into practice!

The saints of Great Britain and the New Martyrs of Greece and those of Bulgaria whom we commemorate today understood better than us the importance of standing before God and establishing above all the sense of being in God's will. Otherwise they could not have found the strength and in many cases the joy to continue in their ascetic struggle and especially the martyrs who understood the great honour which was being bestowed on them, of being witnesses to Christ's sacrifice, by being called to offer their lives for Him. When I read the story of St Alban what impresses me is how quickly and totally he comprehends the mystery of the Cross and agrees to offer his life.

The vocation of red martyrdom is not one which many of us are called to receive in this part of the world, unlike in the Middle East, but there are other notions of martyrdom in the Christian tradition. Red martyrdom signifies those who refuse to deny their testimony to Christ and are put to death (Tertullian calls their death 'the seed of the Church' since their witness to Christ causes many to be converted) while the term "white martyrdom" was used by the Church Father Jerome, "for those such as desert hermits who aspired to the condition of martyrdom through strict asceticism".

There is also another form of martyrdom called green martyrdom which is often applied to the sacrament of marriage. The tensions of marital relations, the pressures of family life and its conflicts are certainly borne witness to by many of us who are in this church today and among our own circles of friends. The Orthodox marriage service is utterly realistic about the suffering involved in the sacrament since as the couple makes the circle of the church three times the choir sings a hymn to the martyrs asking them to intercede with Christ for mercy. At the same time they hold on to the priest's epitrachil around his neck symbolizing the Lord's presence in their marriage and his ever present help.

In the Church tradition it is made clear that martyrdom is a universal vocation for Christians not one restricted to those who have the physical, mental and emotional strength to endure. It is assigned by Christ in a form and measure according to our own capacity to bear it. It comes with sorrow and pain and its purpose is to bring us to salvation. 'There is no joy without suffering', is a favourite saying of St Seraphim of Sarov. And joy, the second of the spiritual gifts listed by St Paul, is the aim of our life in Christ as the martyrs testify. Many are recorded to have gone to their deaths with joy because they wished to share the suffering of others. They saw the incomprehensible and immeasurable love of God in Christ's offering for the whole world and they wished to reflect it in giving their own lives for others.

As we commemorate the Saints of these holy islands, the New Martyrs of Greece under the Turkish yoke and those of Bulgaria let us not be distressed or distracted by the sufferings which they endured. Some years ago I used to teach the British Army Gurkha regiments, who are mainly devout Hindus or Buddhists. One member of the class who was particularly bright and who seemed to be a little marginalized confessed to me that this was because he was Christian. When I asked him about how he felt he responded to my surprise and without hesitation that it was a great honour to suffer for Jesus Christ. He had understood the secret of joy in Christ. So let us dwell on the joy that suffering for Christ inspired in those we remember today and brings to those like us who courageously accept and embrace what he gives us to endure. May we too in our own way experience that joy of martyrdom.

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