32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time C “The witness of the martyrs”

Fr. Frank Schuster

The first reading we have from Maccabees is haunting. The reading begins, “It happened that seven brothers with their mother were arrested and tortured with whips and scourges by the king, to force them to eat pork in violation of God's law.” What is the background here? This is during a time in Israel’s history when they were conquered by the Greeks. Like many conquerors throughout history, the Greeks wanted to erase the culture they conquered by putting their own gods in the Temple and forcing the people under penalty of death to assimilate into the conqueror’s culture…in this instance, forcing the Jewish people to renounce their faith and practices such as abstaining from pork. And so, the issue here was not about pork. It was about religious freedom. Our first reading depicts the martyrdom of these brothers, one by one, in front of their mother. These men would rather die a cruel death at the hands of this earthly king than to renounce their faith in their heavenly King. Their witness helped inspire the Maccabean uprising that liberated Israel. That is what is going on here. After their victory, the Jewish people carefully cleansed their Temple of foreign influence and rededicated it. The Jewish feast day of Hanukah is a remembrance of this time.

There are many reasons why this reading is so very haunting; however, for me what makes this first reading from Maccabees so haunting is as follows. As much as we would like to relegate the king’s cruelty in this story to history, as if this kind of thing couldn’t happen today, we know this kind of thing still happens today and happens too often. There are places in the world where Christians are being dragged out of their homes every day. Even in countries whose governments we consider “moderate” and even allies, like in Saudi Arabia, people forget that converting to Christianity there is still a capital crime punishable by death. What is amazing is that there are still an estimated 1.5 million Christians in Saudi Arabia. Talk about faith!

It is not perhaps always particularly pleasant to think about, however, I mention this because the Catholic Church is built on the witness of the Martyrs. In our Altar here we have relics of three martyrs who were peace loving people who were killed for the only crime of being a Christian, Sts. Beatus, Fausta, and Blaise. As you recall, the word martyr comes from the Greek word that literally means “witness”, and so what are the Martyrs giving witness to? Let’s return to the first reading again. As dark as this reading is, there is good news in here.

Bishop Robert Barron makes the compelling argument that what all dictators and tyrants have in common is that they force people to do their will by either threatening or actually forcibly taking away earthly comforts one at a time, up to even taking away or threatening to take away limbs and life. That is how a tyrant operates. What do the thousands of martyrs from Jewish times, Roman times, and modern times (today) have in common? Just like in our reading from Maccabees today, each one of the seven brothers were able to refuse the tyrant king because they knew in their hearts that the afterlife is better than anything this life has to offer. Each one of them gave witness to their belief in
the resurrection as they gave their lives. They believed in their hearts that the afterlife is what is truly real and that this life is just a shadow. Therefore, no tyrant or dictator could ever have power over them because these brothers would never do anything to offend our heavenly king.

The martyrs throughout the centuries and even today teach us that the only person that can make us a slave to a tyrant is ourselves. Let me say that again, the martyrs throughout the centuries and even today teach us that the only person that can make us a slave to a tyrant is ourselves. Once we make pleasing God our primary concern, there is nothing a tyrant can do to harm us because there is nothing in this world that can please us like our souls belonging to God for all eternity. We are destined to become like the angels, like Jesus says in our Gospel reading. Everything in this life is a preparation for everlasting life. Everything in this life is a preparation for everlasting life. Once we learn this lesson, nothing that happens in this life should ever cause us undue anxiety or fear, because we belong to Christ who is Lord, yesterday, today and forever.

And so, I think the invitation this weekend is for us to think a moment about what is causing us the greatest amount of anxiety right now. What worries us the most, is it something that is going on in our family or work right now? Is it something going on in our country or world right now? What is causing you the most anxiety right now? Can we take a lesson or two from the martyrs and put our unconditional trust in the Lord, come what may? My friends, once we learn how to do this, no tyrant, fear or worry will ever enslave us or claim power over us again. We will learn what it truly feels like to be free, perhaps for the first time, through Christ our Lord. Amen.