

November 6, 2022

Today 's First Reading, or Lesson, is from chapter 7 of the Second Book of Maccabees. We don't actually read much from the two Books of Maccabees at either Mass or the Divine Office. In fact, today's passage from Second Maccabees is the only passage from the Books of Maccabees ever read at Sunday Mass, once every three years at the start of November. There are not many selections from Maccabees at Weekday Masses either, or in the Divine Office.

The Church doesn't draw our attention to the Books of Maccabees very often. The Church does so today, because in the last four weeks of the Liturgical Year (the Church's Year of Worship starts with the First Sunday of Advent) the Church is concerned with the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. Today's Gospel reading from chapter 20 of St. Luke's Gospel gives the Lord Jesus' emphatic teaching that there is a Heaven, a Resurrection onto Eternal Life. Today's selection from Second Maccabees is picked to go with that Gospel passage, the devoutly Jewish mother and seven brothers being unafraid to face death because they know, by Faith, that there is a Heaven, a Resurrection onto Eternal Life. In Jesus' time that party within Judaism known as the Sadducees rejected the Resurrection. The Lord Jesus strongly affirmed it. Indeed, the Lord Jesus would begin it.

The Jewish People suffered terribly under the tyranny of the Greco-Syrian King Antiochus IV, who dared to let his sycophants call him "Epiphanes - Manifesting a god". From that suffering the Jewish People, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, first developed a theology of Martyrdom, the idea that death in the service of God's word and work actually helps bring about the victory of His word and work. The theology of Martyrdom, according to God's plan, is perfectly revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was put to death for doing His Father's work and speaking His Father's word. That very Death perfectly accomplished His Father's work, bringing about deliverance from sin and death for all who have Faith in Him. That very Death, leading to Resurrection and the Gift of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples, caused His Father's word to explode out from Jerusalem, across space and across time, so that it gives life and light to people 2000 years later.

During those 2000 years, Jesus' disciples have experienced persecution, often deadly persecution. The time of Tribulation of which the Book of Revelation speaks is not in the future, but in the present, whenever our loyalty to God's word and work causes us trouble. The Lord Jesus, Who conquered death, guarantees that whatever we suffer for God's word and work, even death itself, only brings us closer to glorious Resurrection. When the Day of the Lord comes, we who have suffered even a little for God's word and work will be among those of whom Revelation says "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the Throne of God, and serve Him day and night within His Temple; and He Who sits upon the Throne will shelter them with His Presence" (Revelation 7: 14-15)

One reason why the Books of Maccabees are not often read in the Church's worship is that they are full of battles and fighting. The Jewish people were delivered from the tyranny of the Greco-Syrian Empire, under God's providence, by a lot of hard fighting.

Such a deliverance is far less important than deliverance from sin and death, which comes only from the Death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. His victory becomes ours through Faith in the power of His Death and Resurrection, and through the Good Works of Charity that must flow from authentic Faith.

Deliverance from earthly tyranny, I admit, in some rare circumstances can come only through hard fighting. There are half hearted tyrannies, and there are whole hearted tyrannies. During a debate in a high school religion class I made the point that non violent resistance against a regime, like Britain's in India, a regime half aware that it is behaving badly and uneasy in its conscience, can work. I invited my teacher and the class to imagine how the likes of Hitler, Tojo, Stalin, or Mao-Tse-Tung would deal with non violent resistance. Of course tyrannies fail in the long term, and God's word always prevails in the long term, by the spiritual power of Jesus Christ. That, however, doesn't mean that there is not immediate suffering and misery that only armed force can stop.

I wasn't wrong, but I realize now that I left something out. The military heroes of the Book of Maccabees, Judas the Hammer and his brothers, are ambivalent. The simple truth is that, as the Lord Jesus observed, "He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword". Even a necessary resort of armed force produces habits of violence that can be hard to break. Violence never really solves problems. At best, it can prevent the very worst from happening. It cannot take care of the underlying problems that produced the desire for violent solutions. I have an excellent, if depressing book, about Asia immediately after the end of the Second World War. People celebrated "VJ Day" exuberantly, but Asia was still a collection of messes, messes that would produce trouble for years to come.

Judas and his brothers are ambivalent. Their necessary violence liberated the Jewish People, but they and the Nation also picked up a habit of violence that would trouble its political life constantly, until the utter disaster of complete defeat at Rome's hands in 70 A.D. Military heroes, but also corrupted by violence, the Maccabees were not the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy in chapter 33 of Jeremiah. They were not the Righteous Branch springing from the stump of David's line. Their aggressive political and military activity, necessary yet also corrupting, could not bring about the Kingdom of God.

The Righteous Branch of David's line is, of course, Jesus Christ. He would bring about the Kingdom of God, present already in all believers through Faith, not by military violence, but by Martyrdom. By His Blood He "ransomed men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation", making them "a Kingdom and Priests to serve our God; and they shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 5: 9-10). Through us, His disciples, He continues to do His work. He triumphs through us every time we suffer even a little for the sake of His Name. Every time we suffer even a little for the sake of His Name the saving and glorious Kingdom of God draws a little nearer.

Yes, the Maccabees are infinitely inferior to the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, they are ambivalent heroes, their line finally undone by the habits of violence that took root in their hearts. In that, however, they can very well stand for all our merely earthly heroes (as distinct from the true Saints of God). Even as they fight for justice, they run the risk of allowing habits of violence take root in their hearts. In the cartoon world, good guys and bad guys are always clearly distinguished from each other. We watch cartoons, either honest cartoons or "live action" films that pretend not to be cartoons, and enjoy watching the good guys beat up the bad guys in absurdly choreographed fight scenes, doing balletic twistings and turnings that would get someone smashed within 20 seconds in a real fight. It never occurs to us that there is corruption lurking in the balletic hero's heart.

Still less does it occur to us that, except in the direst need, fighting injustice with violence rapidly corrupts the heart, and only produces next year's tyrant. Lasting victory over injustice is not won in the Maccabees' way, but in Jesus' way. Lasting victory over injustice is won not through violence but through Martyrdom, either "red" or "white", the giving of one's very life for the service of God and His People.

My personal selection for “Best Novel Ever” is Alessandro Manzoni’s THE BETROTHED”. At one point, trapped in plague ridden Milan, the young hero Renzo, searching for his beloved Lucia, tells saintly Father Cristoforo that, if he learns that Lucia has died, he will kill Don Rodrigo, the second level crime boss who set the novel’s action in motion. Fr. Cristoforo, having contracted the plague himself through his fearless ministry to its victims, doesn’t do what I was trained to do, and say something like “I understand, and wouldn’t blame you, but . . .” Instead he grabs Renzo’s arm and says

“Worm that you are, crawling on the face of the earth, you want to administer Justice! You think you know what Justice is?”

That is not the end of the story, but it is one of the story’s two essential turning points.

Father Cristoforo is calling Enzo not to a Maccabees kind of heroism, but to a Jesus Christ kind of heroism, truly spiritual and truly supernatural. This is the heroism that post Christian cartoon movies quite literally cannot imagine.

This is the heroism of the Martyrs.

This is the heroism that says, in effect, “I know that I am not all that good, and I have no idea if I am better than any of the apparent ‘bad guys’ around or not. I do know that I am going to do my best to help everyone here, by speaking the truth and doing charity. I will not give in to my anger. I will not stand in judgment over anyone’s immortal soul. Nor will I be silent. On the one hand I will name injustice for what it is. On the other hand, I will warn those who call only for Justice, with no thought of Mercy, that Justice, by itself, kills both him who gives and him who receives. Injustice, I warn you, is poison; but, unless mixed with Mercy, Justice is poison too”

Today starts vocations awareness week. So, young men, young women, do you want to be heroic? I hope you do. Youth that didn’t want heroism would be depressing. Let me tell you a story of real heroes. I belong to them, in a way, as a priest, though I am not worthy to unlace their shoes; but perhaps you might be called to this Jesus Christ heroism?

Manzoni’s novel revolves around a historical event, a plague in Milan in the early 17th Century. The imperial Spanish governor abandoned the care of Milan for the demands of high politics, the endless tug of war between imperial Spain and would be imperial France, led by a totally secular Cardinal. Milan was led by a very different kind of Cardinal, Federigo Borromeo. He led his clergy in caring for the sick, in comforting the dying, and in burying the dead. He and his clergy made sure, at the risk and, often enough, the loss of their lives, that all had food and water, protection from the sorts of criminals who always emerge to take advantage of times of trouble, and spiritual consolation. As a health measure, those diagnosed with the plague were gathered together in a “lazaretto”. Who would bring food, water, and medicine to the lazaretto? Who would bring the word of God and Jesus Christ’s saving Sacraments to the lazaretto? Cardinal Borromeo, and some of his clergy, most especially the Capuchin Franciscan Friars, whose heroism in that crisis exceeded all reasonable expectations, did all that.

Increasingly, I think that a priestly or religious vocation calls for some willingness for heroism, for Martyrdom, either “red” or “white”, for the laying down of one’s life for the glory of God and the Salvation of souls.

It might, perhaps must, be objected that, while the behavior of the clergy during a recent international medical event might be described as “prudent” or “responsible”, it could not possibly be described as “heroic”. There may well be some justice in that objection. There were very many restrictions placed upon us. Still, how many of us resolved to do whatever we possibly could do, within those restrictions, instead of settling down into isolation? Eager to be prudent, we were not eager to be heroic. Now, heroism without prudence is no heroism at all,

but mere rashness. Yet, what is prudence without any heroism at all? The ugly word “cowardice” might be used. If we have some excuse, it is simply the following. We were scarcely ever told or reminded that to be a priest of Jesus Christ is to be marked for heroism, for a certain kind of martyrdom, for the laying down of our lives. When there is danger, we are to be on the front line, with a hand of Charity and a word of Hope.

So, when it comes to Vocation Awareness, young friends, I will say this: ask yourself if you are called to what is meant to be a life on the front line, always confronting suffering with Charity, always confronting injustice with Truth, always confronting naked justice with Merciful Justice, and always confronting fear with Hope. If you think you can, with God’s help (only with God’s help!), stand on the front line, and put your life on the line, you might become the kind of priest or religious this Church and this world desperately need.

In view of Death, Judgement, Heaven, and hell, all Christians are to live in opposition to sin, and in expectation of the Resurrection. With such a mighty Hope, we are to fear death far less than sin, and danger far less than cowardice. With such a mighty Hope, rooted in the Sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are to be Martyrs, all of us, laying down our lives for the glory of God and the good of our brethren, in sure and certain hope of Resurrection unto Eternal Life through our Lord Jesus Christ.