

Japanese Martyrs
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 10:26-33)

There was a recent movie which caught my interest because of the subject. It is called “*Silence*,” and it is a movie about the terrible persecutions suffered by the Japanese Catholics in the 16th & 17th centuries when the Jesuit missionaries arrived to bring the Gospel of Christ. Over 100,000 Japanese were baptized, but thousands of these villagers were subsequently tortured and brutally put to death for converting to Christianity, together with the priests and missionaries who tried to serve them. Eventually the faith was suppressed, and no priests could visit Japan for hundreds of years. There was no Mass, no Eucharist, no Sacraments.

Miraculously, the faith survived. Laity continued to administer Baptism to their children, and recite the prayers they learned from the missionaries. They kept the faith alive until priests were once again able to return in the 1800s.

The movie focuses on the way the villagers died, and tells the story of two priests who “apostatized,” renouncing the faith and turning against the Christians they were supposed to serve, because they realized *the cost of being Christian was too great*. The director of the movie is a Catholic, interested in the question of faith. But he is a modern secular Catholic, a skeptic, who can’t grasp the martyrs. What happened to those humble Japanese villagers was so cruel and terrible, he can’t believe Christ would demand that, or that missionaries should proclaim the faith if this was going to be the result.

I wanted to see this movie because it was dealing with a tremendous chapter of our Catholic history, but in the end I was very disappointed, and would not recommend it to anyone, Catholic or non-Catholic. While it shows some of the incredible circumstances of Church’s evangelization in Japan, and the shocking cruelty of the persecution that put so many Christians to death, it doesn’t understand Christianity, and the lesson which Jesus teaches in today’s Gospel. In a climactic scene of the movie, Christ commands the priests and villagers to *deny him*, the opposite of what Christ actually said to his disciples in the Gospel: “*He who denies me before men, I will deny before my heavenly Father*” (Mt 10:33).

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches about evangelization, what is required to preach the Gospel and bring the Good News of God’s Kingdom to the world. Jesus said they would put Christians to death, because God’s Kingdom will overthrow the Devil who rules over the world through his human kingdoms and their violence.

Jesus says, “Fear no one.” He says not to fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. There is only one thing to fear, which is God who judges us on the last day. We must fear only sin, by which we will lose our soul.

In the movie, the priests succumbed to that fear of losing the body, and as a result they were ready to apostatize, deny the faith, and lose the soul. In the movie, the false priests were trying to encourage the Christians to live in peace in this world, instead of helping them preserve their lives for the next world.

The movie is not true. It is a lie. Maybe there were some priests at the time who ended up denying the faith under pressure and because of the torture. But what the movie should have focused on is the tremendous number of Jesuit priests and missionaries who never abandoned the faith, who gave their lives for Christ and served the communities to the end, sharing in the martyrdom and helping to lay the foundations of a Church that continues to exist in Japan to this day.

And not only in Japan. Those same Jesuit priests, as well as Franciscans and other missionaries, have preached and died for the faith in other countries of the Far East, in North America, South America, Africa, and throughout the world. I like to remind people in our own area of the Franciscan Friars who were killed at the mission of San Saba, TX, in 1758 for trying to establish the faith among the Comanche and Apache Indians.

Today we hear in the news almost daily of the terrible suffering and martyrdom of the Christians at the hands of Islam. The twenty Coptic Christians who were beheaded on the beach in Libya while being filmed on video. The four sisters from Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, who were brutally murdered in the city of Aden, Yemen, last year. The parishioners gunned down a few weeks ago in their bus in Egypt while taking a pilgrimage. The countless Christians massacred in Iraq and other areas by Isis, after being raped and tortured. They refuse to deny Christ and convert to Islam. They drop to the ground like swallows.

We wonder, "Where is God?" Or like that movie was trying to question, "Why is He so *silent*, when all these things are happening to His people?"

Jesus tells us in the Gospel, "Do not be afraid," and "Do not think God is silent." Christians may be sacrificed like sparrows, lives may be snuffed out as if they had no meaning or value. But Jesus assures us that not even a sparrow dies and falls to the ground without God's knowledge, and His care. God goes so far as to count every hair on a person's head. God is aware of everything that happens. God knows more about the things that happen to people, and what they go through, than we ever will. And nothing happens without His knowledge and concern, without His horror and anger, without his love and indignation.

God who knows all, says do not fear what these evil people can do to the body, and the way they kill and murder. But definitely be afraid of what God can do on judgement day, when these murderers will have to answer for their crimes as they pay the penalty in their body and soul, for all eternity, in the torment of

Gehenna. On that day it will be just as Jesus says: what happened in darkness and what the world did not know about and what the media ignored – these crimes, horrors, terrible things taking place in the darkness of the world, will be brought to light and proclaimed from the heights of heaven. The martyrs will shine like the sun. They will be vindicated, glorified, triumphant. The Kingdom of God may suffer brutally now, in the world, at the hands of the forces of darkness, but it will conquer. And already it conquers when we realize that no matter what the enemy can do to our body, he cannot touch our soul unless we hand it over to him.

God permits the sparrows to fall to the ground and die. God permits the sheep of his flock to be martyred. But not the soul. As long as the soul is safe (baptized, confirmed, strengthened by grace), God will be able to restore the body in glory on the last day. So Jesus says to fear no one, and to give testimony courageously. We must acknowledge him before others. This is what “martyrdom” means: “to give witness,” to give testimony. If we acknowledge him before the world and the executioners, he will acknowledge us before the Father, before the entire heavenly host of angels, before all mankind assembled for judgment on the last day. We will be publicly acknowledged, rewarded, and glorified.

But those who deny Christ and his Church, those who kill Christians, will be denied by Christ the King before the heavenly throne of the Father, before all the angels and saints. They will be publicly exposed before all their fellow man and condemned to the fiery pits of Gehenna for all eternity, where they will suffer their personal torments and guilt of their crimes, and be ignored, forgotten, and relegated to utter insignificance for all eternity.

This is why the movie fails completely to understand what happened with the early Japanese Christians. Let us then not make the same mistake. Our job as Christians is not get along with the world and save our lives at any cost. Our job is give witness and testimony to the Kingdom of God, and to do so without fear. To fear no persecutor, human or angelic; but to fear God alone, and the possibility of betraying him by sin.