

09 May 2021

Sermons: Martyrdom

Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

There was a time when martyrdom was considered a noble action. Someone who died in defence of their faith, country or a principle was admired. A mystique was often attached to the idea of dying for a good cause. More recently, martyrdom has become associated with suicide bombers and those who are killed in a "holy war" against evil in our world. Perhaps, both these understandings of martyrdom are defective. Someone who dies for their country leaves behind family and friends who will never see that person again in this life. A suicide bomber certainly dies for his or her cause but also intends to harm others. While dying for a principle is a sign of great commitment to it, there may be other ways to demonstrate the same dedication with fewer negative consequences.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples the depth of one's love for another is measured by how much one will sacrifice for that person. By doing so, he reveals the relationship between discipleship and martyrdom.

Although the Old Testament included stories of persecution endured by the Jewish people while enslaved in Egypt, exiled in Babylon and attacked by pagan neighbours, the only recorded accounts of martyrdom were associated with the Maccabean War. When a local Greek ruler tried to force Jews to abandon their faith, it led to incidents such as the martyrdom of Eleazar (**2 Macc. 5:18-31**) and that of the seven brothers (**2 Macc. 7:1-41**). During Christ's lifetime, a group of Jews known as the Zealots sought the removal of the Romans from Palestine and the creation of a Jewish religious and political state through violent means. Many participants in these efforts expected to be martyred in the process. Within this context, the words of Jesus could be heard as a statement about the necessity of dying for a noble cause. Yet, these words also foreshadowed his death on the cross. This death was not for the promotion of a good idea but the fulfillment of a divine purpose: the redemption of sinners. It was the ultimate act of love. As when Christ washed his disciples' feet, these words set a standard for the future behaviour of his followers. It required not the death of a disciple but the willingness to make that ultimate sacrifice when called upon to do so. Laying down your life for another as an act of love also implied an attitude of detachment from life in this world. Yet, such detachment could be expressed in other ways.

With the possible exception of a few medical personnel who understood the risks, treated patients with Covid-19, contracted the virus and died, no one had been called upon to be a martyr during this pandemic. However, Christ's words in today's Gospel provide an opportunity for us to reflect upon the question: how attached are we to this earthly life? Catholics and other people of faith profess there is another life after death. This means life in this world, which despite all its aches and pains is still wonderful, is only a finite good. Eternal life is an infinite one. So, would we be willing to place our life at risk as a sign of love for another? Does it matter if the person we undertake this risk for is a loved one or complete stranger? Disciples of Jesus are supposed to follow his example. He sacrificed his life for sinners. Furthermore, even when we are not called upon to physically die for another as an act of love, how much of our material comfort, physical security or social standing would we be prepared to sacrifice? In the early Church, holy people talked about "white martyrdom" where instead of being killed for the faith ("red martyrdom") they offered their lives in prayer or service as a "living death". Covid-19 might provide us with the opportunity to do the same.

There is no question laying down one's life for one's friend is the most powerful way to show one's love for them. Dying for one's faith, country or a just principle is still a noble action. Both deeds show the depth of one's convictions. Yet, small unseen good deeds like wearing a mask, social distancing or getting vaccinated (especially when we don't feel like doing so) also express our dedication to others in unmistakable ways. We should never underestimate them.

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