

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Twenty-second Sunday after
Trinity
November 17, 2019

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All summer in downtown Boston you can see groups of tourists visiting the big city. With that picture of people on the freedom trail and in duck boats in your mind, get into your time capsule and go back 2000 years. These people are tourists from the country in ancient Palestine and with their tour guide are visiting the big city. The big city is Jerusalem and they are in the Temple precincts. These men are impressed with the whole scene: throngs of devout people, the magnificence of the buildings, and the opulence of the appointments. Some things never change! Tourists are often impressed by the people and places in the big city. But eventually the tour ends, and these people are getting ready to re-board their bus.

Except for the *bus*, that is a description of the men history would later call the Twelve Apostles. Then their tour guide breaks the happy impressions to say the Temple they have just visited, with all its trappings, will one day be thrown down! Everyone was stunned by what Jesus said. It was a real showstopper.

You are I are not stunned. We know the destruction *did* take place in 70A.D. and the residents of the city were scattered. As a result of the destruction of Jerusalem and the persecution of the Church, Christianity was forced out of the Holy City and into becoming the worldwide religion it has been ever since. And it is an observable fact this has been the pattern of Church history: great persecution and the great spread of faith happen almost simultaneously.

Time and again persecutions became the platform for Christian witness before audiences who otherwise would not have paid any attention to religion. Many who witnessed persecutions were emboldened to support and embrace the faith. It all began when a previously-timid Joseph of Arimathea went boldly to Pontius Pilate to beg the body of Jesus. And when the Apostles suffered, there was a dynamic released enabling others to speak out loud in public. Scripture tells us when St Paul's congregations learned of his suffering for Christ they were strengthened and encouraged in their own hope and witness. Sadly, the *opposite* is also true. When Catholic leaders waffle in public, the faith of ordinary church people is sapped and debilitated. The late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago once remarked he would die in his bed, his successor would die in jail, and his successor would die in the

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public square. Cardinal George did indeed die in his bed and we are waiting to see if his successor will do anything to land himself in jail!

Some things have not changed since St Paul's time. We know more Christians died for the faith in the 20th Century than in all previous eras of Church history combined. Where the secular newspapers do not ignore the story, we read of Christians suffering for their faith in Nigeria, China, Pakistan, the whole Middle East, Indonesia, and in the Holy Land itself. They suffer at the hands of hostile religions and local and national governments. Our Lord predicted all this and told us not to spend much time in advance worrying about what we will say. And He promised to put the right words in our mouths if and when the time comes.

One spring in western Michigan thirty-five years ago, an Anglican bishop friend of mine came to visit. I took him to see the local cathedral where we had planned for a conference he was to lead. When we entered the chapter room the bishop surveyed the portraits of the dignified clergymen who had been bishop of that diocese. And after a moment of silence he pointed to a bare spot on the wall and said: "There! When *that* bishop is a martyr for the faith, the gospel will come alive for the people in this area." It was a chilling thought. But again, it is supported by the history of the Church.

Of course there is not only the blood-red martyrdom of faith. There is also a *white martyrdom* of faithful witness. This comes through Christian constraint, the lifelong cultivation of virtue and banishing of vice, through God's grace and the resolute conforming of the will to that of the Lord. This is often done in a way hidden to the outside world, but it at great cost and personal suffering. However our lives work out, in a red way or a white way, in the end there will be nothing left but God and His will.

Against that backdrop our Lord gives us the gospel good news. We see it is not only in our worldly successes through which we learn to give God the glory. Even more in the shadows which contain our disappointments and sufferings do we have the splendid opportunity to place all our hope in Jesus Christ our Lord. What the

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world often sees as setbacks can often be our strongest testimony. The fall of Jerusalem was in the Providence of God. *And so is your life and mine.*