

Sermon, Risto Soramies, ILC, Sept 26th 2018

1st Epistle of St. Peter, Chapter 4, verses 12 to 19.

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. **14** If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. **15** But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. **16** Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. **17** For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? **18** And

"If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Christians

If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

Any normal person, Christian or not, shudders at the thought of being burned alive. St. Peter used the word "fiery trial" as a metaphor, not yet thinking of the fiery stakes that soon would burn in Rome killing thousands of faithful followers of Jesus. But he had already seen, how the enemy of souls hates Jesus, hates His Word and hates His people. Do not consider, he says, this as something surprising. Fiery trials belong to the life of a Christian. Sometimes the flames are small, other times so enormous and hot that the Christian can only call to God in the words of Psalm 22:

Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help. (Ps 22:11)

Persecution is always instigated by the devil, the prince of darkness, but carried out by humans as his tools. It is not, of course, a light thing to be persecuted, hated and despised. You hear lies being told of yourself. Your intentions and motives are misinterpreted as being sinister. You have become the scum of the earth. Those whom you trusted, turn their backs to you. Soon everything that you held dear is either taken away from you or trodden in mud and filth.

As Martin Luther taught us to sing:

*Nehmen sie den Leib,
Gut, Ehr, Kind und Weib:
lass fahren dahin,
sie haben's kein Gewinn,
das Reich muss uns doch bleiben.*

*And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.*

The persecuted believer has one great consolation: "At least I can die bearing the name Christian!"

As St. Peter says:

If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

But there are martyrs who had to die without this consolation. They were burned, not by pagans or atheists, but by the agents of a church that called itself Christian. The executioners were Christians. But in that case, who were those that were burned at the stake?

This must have been a special burden in the minds of Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes, the two German monks who were sent from Wittenberg to the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp. They heard the pure Gospel, that was recently being proclaimed, and they believed it as did all their bretheren, the Monks in their monastery. Under pressure, facing the threat of being executed by fire, should they not recant their "Lutheran heresy" as it was called, all but three succumbed.

Subsequently Johann and Heinrich were sentenced to be burned at stake in Brussels on July 1st 1523 for their simple faith in the Grace of God through Christ. They were insulted for the name of Christ with this double insult: They stood firm in and for the Name of Christ, yet his Name was denied them at the hour of their death.

Would it not be wonderful, even if not easy, to die as a Christian on the arena of the Coliseum as thousands of pagans are watching. You could shout "Christianus sum! I am a Christian" just before the lions would tear you into pieces. Christian generations would tell the tale of your brave and impressive testimony. And truly, there are many who were given this honor. We can certainly thank God for them. But remember: what in our minds is an honor now, was once a shame before men.

But what about those martyrs, whom other Christians considered to be just loony heretics, dumb monks who thought they knew better than the professors of theology, honorable bishops and pious people in the great cathedrals.

These brothers of Antwerp, Johann and Heinrich, knew that they had heard something that was vastly better than the unsure teachings of the contemporary church. They had heard that the wounds of Christ secured salvation for sinners. And God had given them Grace to believe that this was true even for them and for all those who had been struggling to establish their own righteousness and were never able to have one good deed to present for the Holy God. Now they knew that there is a man, sent by God, Jesus Christ, whose deeds satisfied God's holy demands and that these deeds were counted as righteousness and salvation for sinners.

As Johann and Heinrich were burning, there was no shouting "Christianus sum", no writ over their heads declaring that these men are dying because they are followers of Christ. But in the words of Saint Peter, they were "*blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon*" them.

Most of us bear lighter crosses than brothers Johann and Heinrich. Nevertheless the enemy of our souls is trying and tempting us in many ways. But we do not have to resign and grow weary or even be sad or sorry. Through Jesus we are God's people, beloved, forgiven and upon us rests God's glory, hidden to human eyes, including ours, but seen by the angels.

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.