126. Jesus Persecuted

The First Sunday of the Passion

By Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D.

1. Today Passiontide begins, a time especially consecrated to the remembrance and loving contemplation of the sorrows of Jesus. The veiled crucifix and statues, the absence of the *Gloria* in the Mass and the *Gloria Patri* in the responsories of the Divine Office, the suppression of the psalm *Judica me* at the beginning of Mass—all are signs of mourning by which the Church commemorates Our Lord's Passion. Pope St. Leo exhorts us to participate "in the Cross of Christ, in order that we also may do something which will unite us to what He has done for us, for as the Apostle says, 'if we suffer with Him, we shall be glorified with Him.'" [Rom. 8:17] Therefore, we must not only meditate on Jesus' sufferings, but also take part in them; only by bearing His Passion in our heart and in our body (cf. 2 Cor. 4:10) shall we be able to share in its fruits. So it is that in the liturgy of this season the Church repeats more insistently than ever: "If you hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your hearts." [Ps. 94:8; Heb. 3:7-8, 15, 4:7] The voice of the Lord makes itself heard these days, not by words, but by the eloquent testimony of deeds, by the great events of the Passion—a mystery which gives us the most convincing proof of His infinite love for us. Let us, therefore, open our heart to the sublime lessons of the Passion: let us see how much Jesus has loved us and how much we ought to love Him in return; let us learn that, if we wish to follow Him, we, too, must suffer and bear the Cross with Him and after Him. At the same time, let us open our heart to a lively hope, for our salvation is in the Passion of Jesus. In today's Epistle (Heb. 9:11-15) St. Paul presents to us the majestic figure of Christ, the Eternal High Priest, who "by His Blood, entered once into the holies, [that is, Heaven] having obtained eternal redemption." The Passion of Jesus has redeemed us; it has opened once again our Father's house to us; it is then the motive of our hope.

2. The Gospel (John 8:46-59) narrates an instance of the pressing hostility of the Jews, an evident prelude to the Passion of Jesus. In their hardened hearts they had absolutely refused to acknowledge the mission of the Savior; as a result, they schemed in a thousand ways to oppose His teachings and to belittle Him before the people by declaring Him a liar and one possessed by the devil. Their animosity had increased to the point where they decided to stone Him: "They took up stones therefore to cast at Him." Jesus' death was already decreed by the Jews, but the hour fixed by His Father had not yet come, so "Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the Temple."

This passage in the Gospel allows us to consider the conduct of Jesus in the presence of His

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persecutors: we see zeal for their souls, meekness, personal disinterestedness, and total abandonment to God. St. Gregory the Great wrote: “Consider, beloved brethren, the meekness of the Lord. He, Who had come to remit sins, said, ‘Which of you will convince Me of sin?’ He, Who by virtue of His divinity, could justify sinners, does not disdain to prove by reasoning that He is not a sinner.”

The calumnies continued: “Thou art a Samaritan and hast a devil.” The divine Master answered, always with meekness, only what was necessary to testify to the truth: “I have not a devil, but I honor My Father, and your have dishonored Me.” Then He placed His reputation and His cause in the hands of God. “I seek not My own glory; there is One that seeketh and judgeth.” In the meantime, throughout all the discussions, He did not cease to instruct and to enlighten minds, attempting to draw them away from error. Always forgetful of Himself, He thought only of the good of souls. It was precisely in these painful circumstances that Jesus gave us precious instruction: “He that is of God, heareth the words of God. … If any man keep My word, he shall not see death forever.” Let us gather these lessons from the lips of our persecuted Master, and keep them in our heart with a jealous care. In our day, too, the world is filled with His enemies, those who oppose His doctrine and despise His Passion. Let us, at least, believe in Him and be His faithful friends.

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