

## **Resurrection, Hope and New Life**

As we come towards the end of the Church's year in two weeks time, the readings focus on endings and the Church wants us to think about the end of our life and what follows: the resurrection to eternal life with God. Some people think we are crazy to believe in the resurrection, but this is our faith and it is the central most important thing we believe as Christians. In the creed we say we "believe in the resurrection from the dead and life everlasting"

The readings today present us with two sets of Jewish people who have very different views about the resurrection. They are, in the red corner, the Sadducees, and in the blue corner, the Maccabees. The Sadducees appear in the Gospel and the Maccabees in the first reading. The Sadducees were a fundamentalist group who did not believe in the resurrection and they try to use a very silly argument to prove that Jesus is wrong to believe in the resurrection. I don't want to focus on them today. But the Maccabees are different.

The Maccabees are a group of Jewish people who were around about 150 years before Jesus came on the scene. They resisted persecution by invaders intent on wiping out and destroying the Jewish faith. The Maccabees were sustained in the horrible tortures they were subjected to by belief in the resurrection from the dead. One of them says, "Ours is the better choice, to meet death at men's hands...relying on God's promise that we shall be raised up by him..." What gives these guys the courage to die for their faith is their belief that God will raise them from the dead to new life with Him.

The Church gives us these readings today both to affirm the truth of the resurrection and to emphasise its importance to our faith. Why is this important? It's important because it is the firm belief in the resurrection that gave the Maccabees the courage to die for the faith and has given courage to martyrs down the ages to die rather than deny their God and it is this witness that keeps the Church and the faith alive.

'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church', the saying goes. Christianity is the most persecuted religion in history and even today, as I've noted before, 80% of the religious persecution taking place around the world is of Christians. This could give us cause for despair: how can Christianity survive such onslaught. The answer is that it will survive because we believe in the resurrection, the resurrection of the body, the resurrection not only of our body,

but the Body of Christ, the Church. Whatever happens to the Church, because it is the Body of Christ it will rise again. This is the hope that in these times we must cling on to.

---

Soon after ISIS began its wholesale slaughter of Christians in Syria and the Levant five years ago, news started arriving on these shores of the horrific cruelty inflicted on Christians, among them children who were beheaded for refusing to deny their faith and reject Jesus. At first these reports were not believed. Then the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child commissioned an official investigation and a report which confirmed the truth of these stories. Canon Andrew White, an Anglican priest living and working in Baghdad gave a personal testimony about a six-year old boy in his congregation whom ISIS fighters captured. They tried to force the boy, also called Andrew, to deny Jesus on pain of death. The boy refused and was split in two by an ISIS swordsman in front of his mother. This was repeated over and over again.

I have mentioned this before, but in February 2015, twenty-one Coptic Christian men were beheaded on a beach in Libya by IS. It turned out that one of them was not a Christian and was taken by mistake. When the mistake was discovered he was told he could leave, but he was so impressed by the courage of his Christian comrades who calmly accepted execution rather than deny their faith, that he said “Their God is my God” and pleaded to be beheaded with them. His name was Mathew Ayairga. He died a Christian by the baptism of blood. This is for me just a small but significant sign that God can kindle new hope and goodness from such depths of depravity and real evil. It is hope and belief in the reality of the resurrection that makes such courageous sacrifice possible.

---

Today, in the readings of Mass, the Church urges us to reflect on the truth of the resurrection and its power to give hope in the worst of times and the direst of circumstances. It asks, “in tragedy, in pain, in defeat, in loss, in sickness, in hardship, in poverty, in starvation, even in death are we speaking of the end of all hope or just a new beginning?” Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning of all things and their end, and Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. May his name be praised for evermore.