



22nd Week and Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary 3 – 8 September

Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16)

I began to reflect on the Scripture Readings for the 22nd Sunday on Tuesday this week 29 August, the Feast of the Beheading of John the Baptist. I was fortunate to receive the Reflection on this Feast from Fellowship and Aid to the Christians of the East (FACE) which plays an important part in drawing the importance of the Eastern Catholic Church in the growth of the early Church to our attention, and, in the context of the Feast, their ongoing share in suffering for the Faith. The Reflection by Father Robin Gibbons, a Melkite Catholic Priest, reminds us that after Mary, Mother of Jesus *“her relative, John the Baptist, is regarded as the second most important Saint in the Christian tradition.”* I recalled my visit years ago to Masada, the hilltop fortress of Herod overlooking the Dead Sea at the southern end of Israel. As I stood there, I felt the eeriness of the place and the cruelty that took place in the beheading of John. Gibbons speaks of his martyrdom and death holding a special place in scripture *“by his witness to goodness and condemnation of corruption in high places.”* I thought of the visit recently of Cardinal Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church of Iraq, and how he is being discriminated against in his homeland while continuing to witness as John did. Cardinal Fitzgerald, Patron of FACE, wrote in his Easter message: *“As Easter approaches, all come to rejoice with renewed faith in the power of the Risen Lord. Please pray for Eastern Christians, many of whom are suffering from the effects of war and discrimination.”* He went on *“we take the occasion of this Eastertide to recall all that we owe the Eastern Churches: the first preaching of the Gospel, the early Church Fathers and, above all, the witness of the Eastern Christians down the centuries which has been, and still is, an inspiration to our faith.”*

The devotion to John the Baptist in the Eastern Churches brings with it two ideals: first, we like John are “prophets”, proclaiming the way of the Lord in the desert of our world today. I spoke of our life being transformed in Christ at a Funeral recently. A Christian friend came back to me saying thank you and how wonderful it is *“to think that we live forever.”* You can be surprised at the lack of knowledge of the basic beliefs that we can take for granted. The second is to be a “herald” of the acceptance of the joys and the sorrows of daily life. Gibbons says *“All of this is something fundamental in spirituality of the Eastern Church, some of whose greatest gifts come from the way the Eastern Churches have suffered and still suffer for their witness.”*

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



Martyrdom is very much apparent today in all corners of the world. I recall vividly meeting while on holiday in Morocco two of the Trappist monks who were part of the Community in Algeria, when seven monks were kidnapped in the civil war and were killed. The film 'Of Gods and Men' (2010) tells their story. They went to train local people in modern agricultural techniques. They bonded with their Muslim neighbours, teaching French, providing employment and medicine and clothes for the poor. In so doing they followed the example of John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus bearing witness to the greatest commandment of love for God and neighbour and honour Christ's message: *"If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"*.

As we see in the Gospel for the 22nd Sunday, Peter was not anticipating the *"way of the cross"* as going to be the Lord's Way or his own. Jesus' response *"Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's way but man's."*

This coming week we celebrate the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Interestingly, like other major Feasts of Our Lady, its origins are in the East. It was introduced to the Latin Church by an Eastern Pope Saint Sergius I in the 7th century. Two of the scripture quotes regarding Our Lady we might recall on this Feast are: the words of Simon to Mary at the Presentation in the Temple *"a sword will pierce your own soul too"*; and *"Mary pondered all these things in her heart"*. The image of the "Pietà" comes to mind; Mary cradling Jesus in her arms as He is taken down from the Cross.

Let us pray that we may never tire of bearing witness to Christ and the Gospel, even in times of tribulation, as we recall the words of Jesus in the Gospel for the 22nd Sunday *"anyone who loses his life for my sake, will find it"*.

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