

Homily for February 3rd 2017

“Doing good, rather than looking good”

Today is the memorial of St. Blaise. Saint Blaise was the bishop of Sebaste in Armenia during the fourth century. Very little is known about his life. According to various accounts he was a physician before becoming a bishop. His cult spread throughout the entire Church in the Middle Ages because he was reputed to have miraculously cured a little boy who nearly died because of a fishbone in his throat. From the eighth century he has been invoked on behalf of the sick, especially those afflicted with illnesses of the throat. ”

Details regarding the miraculous healing of the boy vary. One account relates that the miracle occurred during the journey to take Blaise to prison when he placed his hand on the boy's head and prayed; another that the miracle happened while Blaise was in prison when he picked up two candles provided to him and formed a cross around the boy's throat.

The use of candles for the blessing of throats stems from the candles that Blaise used while in prison. When an old woman's pig had been miraculously rescued from a wolf by Saint Blaise, she would visit him in prison, bringing him food and candles to bring him light in his dark cell.¹

Martyrdom is the theme in our reading from the Gospel as well. Here we read of St. John the Baptist's fortitude and courage in the face of the vacillating and weak King Herod who had no back bone because his life was governed by the need for human respect. Looking good in the eyes of his friends was more important than doing the good. Martyrs are those people who know that to do the good is way more important than looking good. To fear God and to dismiss the applause and accolades of the people is what matters most to them.

Now, while most Christians are not called to literal martyrdom, we are called to care more about doing the good than in looking good. In our reading from Hebrews we are given clear direction as to what it means to do the good. What motivates our actions and attitudes is Jesus himself. Today we read these famous words:

“Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today and forever”.

This has been the theme of the whole letter... Look to Jesus and you will be inspired to live holy lives, good lives, lives that are witnesses to Jesus.

What does such goodness look like? Generosity towards others, chastity in marriage, detachment from wealth and respect for your leaders; these four dimensions of goodness are expressions of mutual love.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blessing_of_the_Throats

Goodness towards others is shown by extending hospitality to strangers. Here reference is made to Old Testament characters, who like Abraham, Lot and Tobit, in entertaining strangers were actually extended grace to angels.²

Remember as well those being persecuted for their faith, what he refers to here as those who are in prison, where some of them are even being tortured.

Chastity in marriage is expressed in this simple phrase:

“Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.”

St Jose Maria Escriva said of this kind of chastity:

“Human love—pure, sincere and joyful—cannot subsist in marriage without the virtue of chastity, which leads a couple to respect the mystery of sex and ordain it to faithfulness and personal dedication [...].

“When there is chastity in the love of married persons, their marital life is authentic; husband and wife are true to themselves, they understand each other and develop the union between them. When the divine gift of sex is perverted, their intimacy is destroyed, and they can no longer look openly at one another”³

Generosity, chastity and then detachment that is described thus: “Keep yourselves free from the love of money and be content with what you have.” The way of material simplicity allows for that interior contentment that St. Paul echoes in 1 Timothy 6:

There is great gain in godliness with contentment; 7 for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; 8 but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content⁴

Then lastly, mention is made of the leaders whose lives are to be worthy of respect because they are learning to live, wanting to do the good, as opposed to looking good. “Remember your leaders and imitate their faith.”

This is our martyrdom, our witness, shown by generosity to others, chastity in marriage, detachment from wealth and respect for spiritual leaders that will enable us to live for Jesus desiring always to do the good, and therefore we hope, look good in His eyes.

² The virtue of hospitality is given high praise in this passage which contains implicit references to episodes in the life of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18), Lot (cf. Gen 19), Manoah (cf. Judg 13:3–22) or Tobit (cf. Tob 12:1–20), who gave hospitality to wayfarers who turned out to be angels

The Letter to the Hebrews. (2005). (p. 140). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

³ The Letter to the Hebrews. (2005). (p. 141). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

⁴ The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 1 Ti 6:6–8). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.