

Homily for November 24, 2016

Saint Andrew Dung-Lac and Companions

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus speak of the destruction that would come upon Jerusalem between 66-70 AD. Although these numbers are probably inflated, the Jewish historian Josephus estimated that some million people were killed by the Romans during that four year period, in the vicinity of Jerusalem and southern Palestine.

Listen again to part of our Lord's words:

25 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Here Jesus is using a kind of speech called Apocalyptic – a word that means to unveil and reveal. It is the language of exaggerated speech where words are used to describe events that we would say are earth shattering. Here again he is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem a Roman military campaign that changed everything for the Jewish people. Jesus then goes on to say:

27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

When language of clouds is used in apocalyptic literature this is reference to God's presence. Jesus' presence will be such that his coming will envelope the whole world. Ultimately this will happen at the time of the Second Coming. However it has and is also happening in another way. When the sacrifice in the Temple came to an end with the Temple's destruction in 70 AD the Sacrifice of the Mass began to spread and with it Jesus' presence throughout the world, so that today, the Mass is said continuously, 24/7. Whenever we are at Mass we can stand up and raise our hands in thanksgiving because here is the meal of our redemption, a redemption that is drawing closer every day, because with each passing day we are one day closer to death and the full redemption of our souls.

The power of Jesus' redemptive work is so great that today the Church remembers how the Lord's presence reached the people of Vietnam. Today we honour Father Saint Andrew Dung-Lac and the 117 people martyred in Vietnam between 1820 and 1862. Members of this group were beatified on four different occasions between 1900 and 1951. All were canonized by Pope John Paul II.

Christianity came to Vietnam through the Portuguese. Jesuits opened the first permanent mission at Da Nang in 1615. They ministered to Japanese Catholics who had been driven from Japan.

The king of one of the kingdoms banned all foreign missionaries and tried to make all Vietnamese deny their faith by trampling on a crucifix. Like the priest-holes in Ireland during English persecution, many hiding places were offered in homes of the faithful.

Severe persecutions were again launched three times in the 19th century. During the six decades after 1820, between 100,000 and 300,000 Catholics were killed or subjected to great hardship. Foreign missionaries martyred in the first wave included priests of the Paris Mission Society, and Spanish Dominican priests and tertiaries.

Persecution broke out again in 1847 when the emperor suspected foreign missionaries and Vietnamese Christians of sympathizing with a rebellion led by one of his sons.

The last of the martyrs were 17 laypersons, one of them a 9-year-old, executed in 1862. That year a treaty with France guaranteed religious freedom to Catholics, but it did not stop all persecution.

By 1954 there were over a million Catholics—about seven percent of the population—in the north. Buddhists represented about 60 percent. Persistent persecution forced some 670,000 Catholics to abandon lands, homes and possessions and flee to the south. In 1964, there were still 833,000 Catholics in the north, but many were in prison. In the south, Catholics were enjoying the first decade of religious freedom in centuries, their numbers swelled by refugees.

During the Vietnamese war, Catholics again suffered in the north, and again moved to the south in great numbers. Now the whole country is under Communist rule. As is the case in Canada, Vietnam is a country where another kind of slaughter takes place today. 1.6 million babies are killed in abortuaries each year. 300,000 of these babies had been conceived by young women between the ages of 15-19¹

We are always facing the power of the state who orchestrate the killing of the innocent. However, even still, as the Vietnamese martyrs remind us, the presence of the true king of peace and life continues to inspire his faithful to look up and have hope because our redemption is drawing near.

¹ Sarah, Cardinal Robert; Diat, Nicolas. God or Nothing (p. 160). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.