

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time: St. Agnes and the Victory of Christ

I want to begin by telling you about a little girl, most likely 12, possibly 13 years old. She took on a mighty empire and won. The little girl was named Agnes. At least that is the name she is remembered by. *Agnes* means lamb. She was like a little lamb. Agnes was a child of a noble family in ancient Rome, and lived around the year 300 AD. She was a Christian in the last decades of Rome's persecution of the Christians. At that time, more and more members of the empire were becoming Christian including the noble families and even members of the royal household. The Emperor Diocletian decided to put an end to these Christians once and for all with one of the worst of all the persecutions of Christianity. Anyone caught being a Christian would lose all their possessions and be given the option of renouncing Christ or being put to death.

Although a little girl, Agnes was not about to give up Jesus Christ. To complicate matters further, Agnes had caught the eye of the son of the Prefect, Sempronius. The prefect agreed that when Agnes grew up she would make a fine wife for his son. So he called Agnes to his court and offered her gifts if she would give up Christ and marry his son. Agnes refused saying that she was a Christian and would not marry a pagan. For this, she was condemned to death, but Roman law said that a virgin could not be killed. Sempronius thought he could solve this dilemma by forcing Agnes to work in a place of sin. She was taken there in a public display of Roman terror and pagan lust. When the horrible parade got to the place, the perverts were lined up, waiting for her. But somehow, through God, Agnes was protected from the brutes. She continued to refuse to give up Jesus Christ; so the Romans ignored their own laws and killed her.

Agnes is a witness and a martyr to Jesus Christ both by sacrificing her life for the Lord and by defending her own virginity. Her death sickened many throughout Rome and ended up being one of the final blows to the pagan empire. Others would die after her, but within 10 years of her death, persecution ended. Christianity would first be allowed in the empire, and then become the religion of the empire. Agnes won. Diocletian lost. The twelve year old won. The burly soldiers lost. Jesus won. The devil lost. St. Agnes is so loved in Rome that there are two major Churches dedicated to her—St. Agnes Outside the Walls over the catacombs where she was buried and St. Agnes in Agony located on the Piazza Navona at the place where she died. Most visitors to Rome have seen this Church located right across from Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers. Yesterday the universal Church celebrated the Feast of St. Agnes. Her name is also mentioned in the First Eucharistic Prayer. Not bad notoriety for a twelve year old who lived seventeen hundred years ago.

The story of Agnes' brief life on earth but continual life in heaven reminds us that God delivers us from the forces of sin. The forces of darkness tried to destroy Agnes. She must have been terrified at the ways that evil plotted to attack her. But she trusted in God, and God sent her joy. He sent her His Son. In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah we heard that the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali had suffered

the results of their sins. But God made it all right. He brought light to their darkness. He gave them joy and rejoicing. He sent them His Son. He sent us His Son.

Our hope, our joy, and our peace are all in Jesus Christ. Our rest is in the Lord. Other people might attempt to attack our peace. We might be threatened with exclusion from the community if we don't join its immorality, as every middle school, high school and college student, and every adult Christian is threatened. But our peace is grounded in the Lord, not in being part of the crowd. We ask ourselves, "Is it really important what they say about me, think about me? No, if I have to choose, I'd rather choose to live with the Lord than have the approval of those whose actions are in fact rejecting Him, even if they claim to be Christians themselves.

We might be challenged with difficult situations in our family as those we love reject us for taking our faith so seriously. Our homes should be places of peace, but sometimes others in our family are in turmoil and spread this turmoil throughout the house. We can calm the chaos by increasing our prayer life, by intensifying our adherence to the Lord and thus strengthening His Presence in our homes. We might suffer the challenges of bad health. We all know that every one of us will die, but in reality it boggles our minds when we realize that our loved ones or we ourselves will die. Yet, I have had the blessing of witnessing so many people die in peace, united to Christ, simply taking a step from this world to the next. There are many ways that our peace is threatened, but nothing can remove this peace from our lives. No one can take Jesus from us. In fact for us determined, committed Christians, the more difficult the challenge in life, the stronger our faith can become. We trust in our Lord to be with us forever.

Anguish has taken wing. The darkness is dispelled. And the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And Jesus preaches to us, and teaches us and tells us the reason for our joy, "The Kingdom of God is at hand."

And Peter and Andrew and James and John are called to proclaim the Gospel to us, the Good News of Jesus Christ. And we are called to proclaim to Good News to those who are still in darkness. We tell them that no matter what the world throws at us, life is beautiful when it is Christ's life. Like little Agnes, we can conquer all that attacks us. We can remain in peace despite what is happening around us or within us. Like St. Agnes we can, we must, give witness to Jesus Christ. And like little Agnes, we will live in His Peace.