

May 21, 2017 Francis & Philip Homily: Brothers and sisters, in the history of the Catholic Church, there are few stories as memorable as the ones told about St. Francis of Assisi. In 1219, the so-called "fifth crusade" was in progress, pitting Christians against Moslems. In all likelihood, Francis served as a chaplain to the Christian soldiers. One day he told the commanding officer of his plan to cross enemy lines in the company of Brother Illuminato, a member of his fledgling order. He expressed a desire to preach the gospel of Christ to the sultan, a Moslem and ruler of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The commander discouraged him from doing so, warning him that they would likely be taken captive and later beheaded. Francis replied that he believed himself called to martyrdom and was unafraid of death. As expected, once he and his friend crossed enemy lines, unarmed and dressed in their distinctive religious garb, they were seized and then tortured and bound in chains. The two friars were brought to the Sultan. The poor man, Francis, captivated the sultan by his simplicity, courage and zeal. Francis proceeded to proclaim the gospel message to one of the most powerful men on earth. According to legend, the sultan was converted on his deathbed.

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Phillip, a Greek speaking Jewish Christian and one of the seven called to service, was driven out of Jerusalem because of persecution. (Acts 8:1) In the previous chapter, St. Stephen, suffered a martyr's death at the hands of Saul (later St. Paul), who was responsible for his execution. At great risk to his life, Phillip begins the first missionary outreach of the nascent church by going to Samaria. The Samaritans and Jews had a longstanding contempt for each other. A bitter hatred poisoned their relationship for centuries and left them mortal enemies. But, like the Jews, they, too, were awaiting the Messiah. We read in Acts, "Phillip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. With one accord, the crowd paid attention to what was said by Phillip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing". (Acts 8:5-6) The Samaritans received the gospel with joy. So they were the first to benefit from the missionary work of an early Evangelist of the faith. The message of the gospel brought necessary healing and reconciliation.

In his reflections on this reading, the erstwhile Pope, Benedict, zeroes in on one passage: "There is much joy in that city". (Acts 8:8) He writes, "It is possible for humanity to know true joy, because wherever the gospel comes, life flourishes. Just as arid ground, irrigated by rain, immediately turns back to green".

The courage on display in the life of Phillip, Stephen and Francis of Assisi, reminds us of our solemn duty to witness to the faith. We must boldly declare our faith in Jesus and proudly come to the defense of his Church. We must never fall into a deep hole by saying, "Well, one religion is just as good as another" or the equally absurd notion that "religious faith is unnecessary if I am a good person and spiritual". No courage is required for those who adopt a point of view that offends nobody! Such is not the faith of a martyr!

O Lord, give us courage and strength to proclaim your message of salvation.

Amen!