

20th Sunday (A)

17<sup>th</sup> August 2014

*'The blood of Martyrs is the seed of the Church'*

Is 56: I will bring foreigners to my holy mountain Ps 66: May ... the ends of the earth revere Him  
Rom 11: Israel's disobedience, and pagan obedience.  
Mt 15: 21–28: cure of Canaanite woman.

The moving pictures of Pope Francis in South Korea remind us, once again, of the global reach of the Catholic Church — the one true 'world religion,' reaching as it does to all the parts of the world. The Church in Korea is relatively young: the first known baptized Catholic in that country was from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. And yet, in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the Church there grew, but was persecuted mercilessly by the state, on account of the fact that Catholics would not go in for ancestor worship. In 1984, Pope John Paul II canonized 103 martyrs, including the native priest, Fr Andrew Kim Taegon; and yesterday Pope Francis beatified a further 124 martyrs, including a nobleman, Paul Yun Ji-Chung. These are huge numbers of martyrs, from a country which is about the same size as our own — greater numbers than the Catholics here in England suffered during the penal times after the Reformation. We honour some 42 martyrs as saints, and 85 as blessed ... but

the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> c. in Korea was an era of outstanding witness to Christ. It's borne fruit in Korea today, such that the Church there has grown by 70% in ten years: there are over 5m Catholics in that country, and almost 5000 priests!

The Church has often said, since way back in the persecutions and martyrdoms in Rome under the Roman Emperors, that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Far from discouraging conversion, the witness of a life given for Christ is a great spur to know that faith is meaningful, life-giving, important. Faith is more important than preserving one's earthly life. "What does it profit a man to keep his life, but lose his soul?" says Jesus. To die for Jesus, keeping the faith, imitating Christ in His Crucifixion, is the highest calling of a Christian: one which we maybe do not have to contemplate daily, but which many of our Catholic brethren do. We think also, in these days, of the Catholics of Iraq, being killed on a daily basis, being driven out of places where the faith has been celebrated since the time of the apostles, and where churches as old as 1800 yrs are being desecrated and burnt

down. We need to keep these suffering, crucified parts of our Catholic family in our prayers: but their witness should in turn have a profound effect on us. We should see their heroic martyrdoms as reminding us of the nature of our faith; that we are called on, each of us, by our Baptism, to give up our lives for Christ. Living the Gospel is a tough thing, a great and wonderful giving-up of life, a marvellous sacrifice of pleasure and liberty, for something really worthwhile. The martyrs of the Church down the ages have lived this truth and joy: to keep their lives at all costs other than to deny Christ ... But to give up their lives in this world rather than to deny Him. This is our tradition; this is the extent, “to the very end,” to the giving of our whole lives, that we must love our Lord Jesus.

One of the sheer joys of being a Catholic is the global unity of our devout Catholic family, that whether in Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> c., in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. in Korea in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the faith is one and the same: all of us, a worldwide pilgrim family, striving to follow Christ’s “narrow way.” In the Gospel today, as prefigured in Isaiah, and echoed in

St Paul, Our Lord makes clear that the graces of the Messiah will spill over outside the boundaries of Israel, to encompass and embrace the whole world. In a moment of what could be called ‘banter,’ Our Lord and this woman exchange a few comments, and yet the outcome is clear. That she is a ‘foreigner’ from outside Israel, a Canaanite, does not prevent her from receiving the blessings of the Saviour. What concerns Christ is not her origin or her background, but her faith: “Woman, you have great faith. ... Let your will be granted.” This is what matters: to have faith, to act on it, to live it, to die with it. Let’s feel this glorious, breathtaking sense that all humanity — of all cultures — finds its purpose only in the Son of God. We have this great treasure, our faith; the most precious thing we possess, the “pearl of great price.” We must never ever jeopardize this prize possession. Please God, when the time comes for Him to call us to the great sacrifice of our lives, Jesus will also be able to say to us: “Woman/Man, you have great faith ... Let your will be granted ... Come into My Kingdom.”