

Today is traditionally called Good Shepherd Sunday, but the readings today call our attention more to the *flock* than to the *shepherd*; and the readings tell us that there is a great diversity in the flock; there are different kinds of sheep. In the first reading, Paul and Barnabas preach to Jews, to converts to Judaism, and to Gentiles in Antioch. In the second reading, John says he “had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from *every* nation, race, people, and tongue.” Indeed, there is great diversity in the flock. But the one thing that brings them together is **faith**: faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And that’s our focus today.

Growing up and living in a country that prizes individual freedoms, including freedom of religion, makes it easy for us to choose the faith we want, and to live that faith – in most instances – unhindered, without fear of reprisal or persecution. Faith is something we often take for granted, something we hardly ever have to suffer for. Little do we realize that this is not the case in so many parts of the world.

On the Internet, there is a website called *The Voice of Martyrs*: [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com); it’s a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting and listing the persecuted Christians around the world. You can find there familiar names like Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty of Hungary; Cardinal Aloysius Stepanic of Croatia; Lutheran minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in a Nazi concentration camp; Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, gunned down in his church in San Salvador while saying mass; the slaughtered Jesuits and their

housekeepers in El Salvador; Maximilian Kolbe, who took the place of a condemned prisoner at Auschwitz; and many others who died for their faith.

But the purpose of *The Voice of Martyrs* is not to make us aware of ancient history. The purpose is to put us in touch with the Christians who are being martyred in our own day because of their faith. For decades, Christians in Algeria have been suffering under the regime of a hostile government. In China, it's illegal to be a Christian; more than 15,000 religious sites have been destroyed, and believers, including 2 Catholic bishops, have been sentenced to prison. After the Persian Gulf War, tens of thousands, many of them Christians, were gassed, shot or forced to leave their homes in Iraq. In Kuwait, where Sunni Islam is the state religion, Christians cannot become citizens. Christians in Egypt are forbidden to build, repair, or repaint their churches; in 1995, 15 Christians were murdered as they prayed; and in 1998, 1200 Christians were detained and tortured by Egyptian army security officers.

The list and horror stories are simply endless; they go on and on and on. It is said that, statistically, more Christians have been persecuted, imprisoned, and put to death in this past century than in all the previous nineteen centuries put together. I wasn't able to verify this, but a Pastor David Barrett reported that 41 million Christians have been martyred, with 26 million Christians martyred after 1900. Even today – as I speak – hundreds of thousands of Christians are being persecuted, imprisoned, and killed precisely because of their faith.

If you go to *The Voice of Martyrs* website today, you can read about Christian families in Laos who have been forced to relocate from village to village, having their homes and churches destroyed. In Morocco, the government has expelled as many as 60 Christian aid workers, raided an orphanage, separated and deported foster parents from their adopted children. You can read about a Christian family in Vietnam who has suffered severe abuse from villagers and local Vietnamese officials, expelled from their home and forced to flee into the forest. You can read about two Christian women in Iran, arrested as anti-government activists, and held in Iranian prisons; in Iran, believers are subjected to surveillance, arrests, imprisonment, and sometimes torture. You can read about Christians in Pakistan, who are harassed, verbally abused, and beaten by Muslims. In so many parts of the world, having faith in Jesus Christ means putting your life on the line.

Way back in the third century, when persecuting Christians was still the entertainment of the Roman emperors, Tertullian, one of the Church fathers, wrote: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

It is this kind of faith that enabled the early Church – those little communities of Peter and John, of Paul and Barnabas, those little communities who suffered so much, to take firm root and grow into a church that covers the whole world. It is this kind of faith – a faith that still today people continue to die for, that enables the Church to survive and bear abundant fruit. You and I are the benefactors of this kind of faith. Let’s never take

it for granted. Let's never *ever* forget to keep in prayer all those being persecuted because of their faith. Let's always be thankful to God for blessing us so richly.