

18. April 2020

“Frankness and true obedience“

Acts 4,13-21

They were astonished at the fearlessness shown by Peter and John, considering that they were uneducated laymen; and they recognised them as associates of Jesus; but when they saw the man who had been cured standing by their side, they could find no answer. So they ordered them to stand outside while the Sanhedrin had a private discussion. 'What are we going to do with these men?' they asked. 'It is obvious to everybody in Jerusalem that a notable miracle has been worked through them, and we cannot deny it. But to stop the whole thing spreading any further among the people, let us threaten them against ever speaking to anyone in this name again.' So they called them in and gave them a warning on no account to make statements or to teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John retorted, 'You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God. We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard.' The court repeated the threats and then released them; they could not think of any way to punish them, since all the people were giving glory to God for what had happened.

We have often thought about the frankness of St. Peter - here we also mention the favorite disciple of the Lord.

Peter had already had his hard lesson behind him, when he denied the Lord three times for fear of death or prison, and then recognized this. How will it have hurt him, for he loved the Lord. But he was not yet strong enough, he did not yet have the "frankness" that now distinguished him. Now he could make up for it, just as he could answer yes three times to the question of the risen Lord at the Sea of Galilee, whether he loved Jesus. Then the Risen Lord entrusted him to graze the flock (*cf. Jn 21,15-19*).

Now Peter is undaunted, for the Holy Spirit of strength is working in him. He had put aside his fear of the High Council, for he was obliged to do the same as the High Council should have done - to listen to God. Since they did not do so, Peter could not longer listen to them, for religious obedience has a limit which must not be crossed.

All authority has only God in him, all human authority, including religious authority, is conferred and is only legitimate if it does not contradict divine authority. This makes the apostle free to act according to the will of God and is also an important message for us.

Peter was even able - just like his Lord and in the same spirit - to question the actions of the high priests in their own self-understanding: *"You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God."* Then clearly: *"We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard."*

Let's take another close look at the situation and draw the right conclusions. Jesus, the Son of God himself, instructs his apostles to preach the gospel. The proclamation is accompanied by signs and wonders that confirm the divinity of the mission.

An authority, also previously appointed by God, wants to prevent the name of Jesus (let us remember the meditation of yesterday: *"Only in him is there salvation; for of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved"* (Acts 4,11-12)). They were already responsible for the death of the Redeemer and now they want to prevent all that happens in his name.

Their motives may be different. Perhaps some have actually thought that now a dangerous sect brings corrupting teachings. In any case, the people in charge who want to prevent the apostles - the unlearned men - are blind! (*cf. Lk 6,39*). They have become blind leaders of the blind and have become stubborn with regard to the Lord!

So their authority no longer has any legitimate inner foundation - it is now even being directed against the action of God himself.

This teaches us to pay close attention to whether an authority is legitimate and to examine accordingly whether it acts in such a way. This examination consists not only in checking whether an authority has been legitimately installed, which was certainly the case with the high priests, but also whether it acts in accordance with God and does not abuse its authority. By this I do not mean minor or major errors that can happen to anyone. If one questions obedience to a legitimate authority, then it can only be about very essential things that concern God himself and the area of conscience. If this is not the case, everyone would do what he thinks is right! That would create chaos.

But today's example shows us that there can be a conflict of authority. This is not excluded even for today, because religious obedience is not blind obedience to a human authority. If it were demanded in this way, it would lose its inherent dignity.

The apostle Peter remained faithful to the Lord's command until death. May the Lord grant to his own that they will not be so intimidated by any authority that they no longer follow their mission and vocation!