

24. April 2020

“The advice of Gamaliel”

Acts 5, 34-42

One member of the Sanhedrin, however, a Pharisee called Gamaliel, who was a teacher of the Law respected by the whole people, stood up and asked to have the men taken outside for a time. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin, 'Men of Israel, be careful how you deal with these people. Some time ago there arose Theudas. He claimed to be someone important, and collected about four hundred followers; but when he was killed, all his followers scattered and that was the end of them. And then there was Judas the Galilean, at the time of the census, who attracted crowds of supporters; but he was killed too, and all his followers dispersed. What I suggest, therefore, is that you leave these men alone and let them go. If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will be unable to destroy them. Take care not to find yourselves fighting against God.' His advice was accepted; and they had the apostles called in, gave orders for them to be flogged, warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name. Every day they went on ceaselessly teaching and proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus, both in the temple and in private houses.

The Gamaliel's advice has gained a certain fame, because even today, we say in the Church: if it comes from God, it should grow; but if it is not from God, it will dissolve.

If we apply this sentence to history, we can say that the Church, for example, must be from God, because despite many attacks, persecutions, divisions, sins and confusion, the Church still exists and lives today. We could say something similar about the people of Israel: it still exists, despite unimaginable suffering and persecution. On the contrary: today the people of Israel even has a home, and Jews from all over the world are invited to settle in Israel, regardless of how one might judge the political situation correctly. The Gamaliel's advice is therefore confirmed if we look at it throughout history.

In the case of today's reading, the Gamaliel advice is helping the apostles to get out of this unfortunate situation. I think the advice was immediately clear to those who

did not really know what to do with the apostles. The situation had become increasingly difficult for them. They could not and would not say yes to the works of the apostles, their hearts were too closed. Now they were constantly confronted with the actions of God, which happened through the apostles, and their helplessness grew ever greater. You can see it from the fact that they had the apostles flogged and ordered them to no longer speak in the name of Jesus. They already knew that the apostles would not obey them.

The apostles, on the other hand, could change their situation through the Spirit of God. They endured the blows because they knew that they had received them for the sake of Jesus.

This is a completely different way of thinking than we find in the High Council, and the text makes us aware that the disciples even rejoiced.

What joy can one feel when one receives unjust blows?

When one receives a just punishment, there can even be a certain satisfaction in the soul, because something is compensated and paid for, and perhaps even a relief, because now something may come to an end.

But it is different in this case, because this is not a just punishment, but an arbitrary act. Normally the reaction would be rebellion, counter-aggression and the desire to set things right.

The apostles, however, left their natural reaction.

Surely they will not have considered the unjust act righteous, but they did think of their Lord - the righteous - who took upon himself and paid for the injustice of this world. So, at that moment, they united themselves with the suffering of Christ and allowed the injustice to happen to them.

This exceeded the natural reaction and was only possible through the Spirit of God and in the inner connection with God. Hence the following expression: *„And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name.“*

The actual injustice was transformed for the apostles into an act which they consciously endured and even felt it an honour to act like their Master. This is the

moment when joy is shared. So it is not a perverse joy of mistreatment, but the joy of becoming more like the Lord.

This is now also an example for us. In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord says that those who are insulted and persecuted and slandered in every possible way for the sake of His name are to be praised blessed (*cf. Matt 5,11-12*).

This joy of the apostles already belongs to these beatitudes. What a transformation of the situation! Those who are in power were helpless and they punished unjustly and on the other hand the powerless who were brave and joyful in sufferings.

It is no wonder that the apostles emerged from the situation very strengthened in this way, for *“every day they went on ceaselessly teaching and proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus, both in the temple and in private houses.”*