

18. October 2020

“Vigilance in praise”

Mt 22,15-21

At that time the Pharisees came together and decided to trap Jesus with a question. They induced their disciples, together with the followers of Herod, to go to him and say: “Master, we know that you always speak the truth and truly teach the way of God without regard for anyone, for you do not look at the person. So tell us: In your opinion, is it permissible to pay tax to the emperor or not?” But Jesus, recognizing their evil intent, said: “You hypocrites, why are you setting a trap for me? Show me the coin with which you pay your taxes!” Then they held out a denarius to him. He asked them: “Whose picture and inscription is this?” They answered: “The emperor.” Then he said to them, “So give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

“Whoever digs a pit for others will fall in it himself.” This is a proverb we like to use in Germany when someone deliberately wants to harm others, because it falls back on himself. It is also a theme in many fairy tales: To do and plan evil will take revenge, because you cannot play with the truth and you cannot manipulate it.

The hearts of the Pharisees had already darkened towards Jesus. Perhaps they thought they were right to ask such a question because they wanted to convict him and were looking for proof that Jesus had sinned against their religion.

But their question was full of hypocrisy, and the very first sentence convicted them!

“Master, we know that you always speak the truth and truly teach the way of God without regard for anyone, for you do not look at the person.”

Actually, the Lord could have ended the conversation after this sentence and simply said: “If it is as you say, then listen to me!”, for although it was a hypocritical introduction, they were actually telling the truth, but only to trap him!

This teaches us how the forces of evil act, and we can learn from Jesus how to deal with them!

The forces of evil like to disguise their intentions and flatter people. Who does not like to hear that one always tells the truth, is righteous, does not let oneself be corrupted and teaches the way of God? This is a great praise and certainly what one strives for as a Christian! Such praise can be taken as a confirmation of one's own way and person, and it can even be true - as in the case of the Lord!

Spiritual vigilance teaches us that we must be wise in our dealings with the praise of men, for praise can arouse vanity and complacency in us which are not yet overcome within! It is all too easy for people to admire and praise us if there is anything that can attract special attention. Since we humans want to be great, we may think that our personal value is increased by the praise of the people. But this makes us easily susceptible to deception. Even when praise is sincerely meant and is not in the service of a "trap", as in today's Gospel, it needs our spiritual vigilance so that we can gratefully attribute the good or even a special gift that is effective in our lives to the Lord, rather than to ourselves.

Jesus, free of vanities of any kind, did not allow himself to be deceived by hypocritical praise and was therefore able to notice the trap that was set for him and respond to it accordingly. The questioners were put to shame, and we received the precious teaching from him that one must distinguish between the worldly and the spiritual.

To be able to react to a trap in this way requires an inner freedom, so that the Holy Spirit gives the right instruction.

Let us protect our "inner castle" so that we do not fall into traps. Let us understand that our value is that we are beloved children of God and that all dignity is given to us by Him. Then we will be free from the praise of men! If it is sincerely meant and justified, then we can thank the Lord and rejoice, if it is hypocritical or a false assessment of ourselves, then we will not be blinded and remain vigilant!

Perhaps we can then, in the Spirit of the Lord, give the appropriate answer, which glorifies God and gives the right light!