

3. March 2021

“Instructions of the Lord”

Mt 20:17-28

Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, and on the road he took the Twelve aside by themselves and said to them, 'Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised up again.' Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came with her sons to make a request of him, and bowed low; and he said to her, 'What is it you want?' She said to him, 'Promise that these two sons of mine may sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom.' Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?' They replied, 'We can.' He said to them, 'Very well; you shall drink my cup, but as for seats at my right hand and my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted by my Father.' When the other ten heard this they were indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that among the gentiles the rulers lord it over them, and great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Jesus speaks very clearly here of his death in Jerusalem. The disciples should know it and the Holy Scriptures will testify to it: the Son of God goes to his death for us voluntarily (*cf. Jn 10:18*). He knows what is coming and in Gethsemane we hear that he could have avoided the threatening death at any time if he had called the angels to help him (*cf. Mt 26:53*). Not only does he predict death, but also his resurrection, all that we liturgically celebrate at the end of this Lent.

And the disciples? One hears no reaction from them. It will have gone beyond them.

It was Peter who wanted to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem and he got a clear rejection (*cf. Mt 16:22-23*). The Son of Man wants to go this way because it is the Father's command, because he wants to glorify the Father and redeem people.

One can well imagine an affected silence of the disciples and almost read it out of the text. Their beloved Lord speaks such serious words. They could not yet comprehend this, so they remained silent. Perhaps they looked at each other in search of help. Who hears it without consternation when the beloved Lord pronounces all the terrible things that are coming upon Him. They will hardly have realised the hopeful and so important message of the resurrection. Even when the news of Jesus' resurrection came to them later, it was difficult for them to grasp it (*cf. Lk 24:9-11*). Under the pain of the disciples about Jesus' words today, the words about the resurrection probably remained as good as unheard!

Even maternal desires have to fit into the kingdom of God. It is understandable that the mother of the sons of the Zebedees asks for the best for her children or, more precisely, what she thinks is best. In view of the knowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, she hopes for the highest honour for her sons. But she gets a lesson from the Lord: *“You do not know what you are asking.”*

This is also an important teaching from the Lord for all of us.

There are petitions which we can and should always address to the Lord: the salvation of people from eternal destruction, the petition for spiritual growth, the petitions for daily bread, the conversion of sinners, protection from disaster and distress and much more!

But there is a limit to our petitions when they enter, so to speak, a realm that is under the direct guidance of God, when we, like the woman of Zebedee in this case, would intrude there with our wishes and desires. Hence the clear rejection and later still the explanation of the Lord: *“as for seats at my right hand and my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted by my Father.”*

This may be a hint to us to feel very finely where our limit is when we formulate “bold prayers”, which we should certainly do. If perhaps one has gone very far with one's requests, one can wisely add to one's petition to the Lord: “if this is according to Thy Holy Will”!

The third point to remember is that true greatness in following Christ is service to God and neighbour. In this way we become like the Lord who *“came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28)*.

It is an abysmal word that corrects all self-centredness, false claims to dominion, as well as incorrect ideas of greatness, and matures that wonderful virtue in us that we call by the word humility.