

9. July 2021

“Cunning as Snakes and Yet Innocent as Doves”

Mt 10:16-23

'Look, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves; so be cunning as snakes and yet innocent as doves. 'Be prepared for people to hand you over to sanhedrins and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, as evidence to them and to the gentiles. But when you are handed over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say; what you are to say will be given to you when the time comes, because it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you. 'Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will come forward against their parents and have them put to death. You will be universally hated on account of my name; but anyone who stands firm to the end will be saved. If they persecute you in one town, take refuge in the next; and if they persecute you in that, take refuge in another. In truth I tell you, you will not have gone the round of the towns of Israel before the Son of man comes'

How can we reconcile an attitude of openness and kindness towards people with the Lord's warning to us today to beware of men? Is this not a contradiction? How can we understand that on the one hand we are sent as sheep among wolves, and at the same time we are called to proclaim God's mercy and kindness? How can we endure a situation of enmity even within the same family, and be hated by all because of Jesus, as the Gospel says?

It would be too simplistic and inaccurate to say that these words of the Lord were addressed only to the situation of the disciples at that time. It is always necessary to confront ourselves with the words of Jesus, in order to extract the true teaching they give us.

These words of Jesus invite us to have a supernatural vision and attitude towards people. This supernatural perspective teaches us and makes us capable of loving people even if they are our enemies because of the gospel. It can happen, for example, that a person with a kindly disposition changes his attitude and becomes reluctant as soon as the Gospel's call to conversion is addressed to him. There are two possibilities in our human nature.... On the one hand, it is often said that the human soul is Christian, in that it is receptive to the truth of the Gospel. On the other hand, there is the struggle of the flesh against the spirit (*cf. Gal 5:17*), as a

consequence of original sin. We must perceive this inner contradiction in ourselves as well as in others.

In proclaiming the Gospel, the disciples must be aware of this reality. This brings us to the vigilance that today's Gospel asks of us. It involves, on the one hand, holding fast to the fundamental decision to love people; and, on the other hand, being aware that they can turn against us, and reject and persecute us for Jesus' sake.

Therefore, we must be astute in our relationships with people. One cannot be naive, for then the disciple would lose the valuable gift of discernment of spirits. Therefore, meekness of heart must be accompanied by shrewdness of understanding. We must not be distrustful, suspicious at all times of every person; but trust in man's ability and desire to be open to the truth. At the same time, we must be aware that he can also close himself to the truth, and then that hostility can be aroused in him, which can go to those extremes that today's gospel presents to us. This is not only a reality of the past; it also counts for our time!

However, the Lord does not leave his disciples alone in these difficult situations. Just as he grants them his grace, enabling them to pass on the gospel in his own Spirit and at the same time acting in the heart of the hearer, so he sustains him in difficult conflicts, when he suffers need and persecution for their sake. God knows how to integrate these situations into his plan of salvation! In that sense, today's text tells us that, because the disciples will be brought before the courts, the message of salvation will also reach the authorities.

The Lord promises his own the unconditional assistance of the Holy Spirit, who will make known to them what they should say in persecution. This is a clear reminder that the disciple is a sent one, acting on behalf of another, and not by virtue of his own thinking and willing.

So the tension mentioned at the beginning, between the attitude of openness towards people and the necessary vigilance, is not an invincible contradiction, but we find it also in the life of Jesus, who loved people as no one else ever did, even to the point of giving his life for them, but who also hid himself from them (*cf. Jn 8:59*), because he knew what was in their hearts (*cf. Jn 2:24*).

The inner contradiction in which man lives is a consequence of sin, which destroys the life of grace and thus disfigures the person. The exhortation of today's text is that we should be aware of this reality, and confront it with astuteness and a meek

heart. For this we have been given the Holy Spirit, who enables us to resolve this tension in Him.