

21. August 2021

“A Lesson of Humility”

Mt 23,1-12

Then addressing the crowds and his disciples Jesus said, 'The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do and observe what they tell you; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader headbands and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honour at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted respectfully in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi. 'You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.'

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a lesson in humility, knowing that the desire to be great and to enjoy prestige is deeply rooted in man. Therefore, we can rightly describe humility as the fundamental attitude of the creature before his Creator.

It is a virtue that is not so easy to acquire. It is worth remembering that the real temptation of the Devil was precisely pride, insofar as he no longer wanted to continue serving God with love, but sought to place himself in the place that corresponds to God. This diabolical rebellion and arrogation will be clearly manifested in the figure of the Antichrist at the End of Time (cf. 2 Thess 2:3-4).

It will be difficult to acquire humility directly, through concrete acts. This virtue arises rather as the fruit of a life pleasing to God in the following of Christ.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us concrete guidelines for living this virtue. In the first instance, the Lord presents us with the negative example of the scribes and Pharisees. They seek to be recognized by men. Their aspirations are not set on God nor do they seek his glorification; they place their own person at the center. Jesus makes it clear that their instructions are to be accepted, as long as they sit "on Moses' seat" (in the ecclesial context we could say: "as long as they teach the right doctrine").

However, the Lord warns against imitating their conduct. We should always keep in mind this unpleasant attitude of the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus refers here, so that we examine our behavior and question whether we too seek our own glory.

If we notice that this is the case, then let us step back and give God the glory, through a simple inner prayer, which might sound like this: “Dear Lord, see that once again I have put myself in the limelight. But to You alone is the honor due!”.

If we learn to perceive our attitudes more and more, we will also notice more quickly when we have given in to self-love and vanity. Jesus' words that follow are even more profound. The disciples must be aware that there is only one Master, one Father and one Teacher. In other words: true authority comes from God, and any authority on the human plane comes from Him and is not valid in itself.

This is how we could interpret these words, which constitute a further invitation to practice humility, for all too easily we yield to the temptation of wanting to be great on our own and also to be seen as such by others. We can also put this into practice in a concrete way. If we notice that we are good at something, that we are acquiring a certain authority, that people are listening to us, then it will be all the more important for us to remember God, thanking him for the ability to instruct others in certain fields. If we understand this capacity that has been given to us as a service entrusted to us, without losing sight of God, then we will know how to correctly handle situations that would induce us to pride.

If in the Christian sphere we use the titles 'Father' or 'Master', we must be clear that they are so 'in Christ'. At the end of today's text, Jesus gives a clear indication in which he makes a kind of synthesis of all that has been said:

"Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up."

It is very profitable to meditate these words in our hearts and to bring them frequently to mind. We should not simply overlook the pride and vanity we discover in ourselves, much less justify these attitudes.

The invocation of the Holy Spirit will help us, particularly in those moments when we notice our pride.