

6. October 2021

I strain forward to what lies in front

Phil 3:8-14

Reading from the memorial of St. Bruno

Yes, I will go further: because of the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, I count everything else as loss. For him I have accepted the loss of all other things, and look on them all as filth if only I can gain Christ and be given a place in him, with the uprightness I have gained not from the Law, but through faith in Christ, an uprightness from God, based on faith, that I may come to know him and the power of his resurrection, and partake of his sufferings by being moulded to the pattern of his death, striving towards the goal of resurrection from the dead. Not that I have secured it already, nor yet reached my goal, but I am still pursuing it in the attempt to take hold of the prize for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not reckon myself as having taken hold of it; I can only say that forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

Although they are not very frequent, vocations emerge again and again who withdraw completely from the world, to live with God in solitude, renouncing everything in order "to gain Christ". Yesterday we reflected on the Gospel story of Jesus' meeting with Martha and Mary, and in that context we highlighted the importance of contemplative vocations. On this day, we commemorate St Bruno, who, in the year 1084, withdrew with six companions to lead an austere religious life. From this the Carthusian Order was later formed. In a letter to a provost, a friend of his, St. Bruno writes:

„Prudence knows what Wisdom herself says: 'So in the same way, none of you can be my disciple without giving up all that he owns' (Lk 14:33). Who does not see how beautiful, useful and pleasant it is to remain in her school, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, learning divine philosophy, which alone confers true happiness?“

St. Paul is aware of this, because the knowledge of Christ, his Lord, surpasses everything, to the point that the Apostle calls all things „filth“, to make clear the abysmal difference between an encounter with Christ and a life without Him.

While the vocation of a St. Paul, a St. Bruno or a Carmelite vocation represent particularly shining jewels in the ark of the Church, it is incumbent on every Christian to race „*towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.*“

Although we may be more involved in earthly realities, because of family life and work, these words do not fail to apply to the situation in which we find ourselves. Nothing must come before Christ; we are to seek Him always and everywhere, striving to fulfil His Will! This is what makes our life already heavenly. The more the Lord takes shape in us, the more we will be marked by His life.

Paul makes it clear that he himself is not yet perfect, and in this context he gives us an important guideline for following the Lord in ardent love:

The Apostle longs with all his might for this life in Christ, and subordinates everything else to this goal. Nothing must rival this special love for Christ - nothing and no one! Everything else, whatever it may be, is to be placed behind the Lord.

And St. Paul mentions another fundamental point: „*forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing-point ...*“

His gaze is directed towards the goal: to be with the Lord in eternity and, until that time comes, to fulfil the mission that God has entrusted to him in his earthly life. He does not look back; that is to say, he is not constantly occupied with earthly realities; but he is fixed on the „now“ with the eyes of what is to come.

Here is important advice for all of us, how we can live fruitfully and wisely! This applies both to a Carthusian or Carmelite, whose life is particularly focused on eternity, as well as to all Christians, who, for the most part, find themselves in other circumstances of life.

Day by day we approach eternity; day by day the day of Christ's return approaches. This approach gives our soul a concentration and strength such as we see in the Apostle to the Gentiles. It teaches us to look at things from the perspective of eternity and to classify them according to their importance. We will of our own accord leave out unimportant things; we will avoid useless or even harmful pleasures; and we will use the time we are given to respond to „*God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus*“.

The Apostle's words and St. Bruno's example are an invitation for all of us to focus more and more on God, without allowing ourselves to be absorbed by earthly realities to the point of losing sight of Him.