

17. October 2021

Learning to serve

Mk 10:35-45

*'James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Jesus. 'Master,' they said to him, 'We want you to do us a favour. 'He said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory. 'But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I shall drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I shall be baptised?' They replied, 'We can.' Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I shall drink you shall drink, and with the baptism with which I shall be baptised you shall be baptised, but as for seats at my right hand or my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted. 'When the other ten heard this they began to feel indignant with James and John, so Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that among the gentiles those they call their rulers lord it over them, and their 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 slave to all. For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*

How true are the Lord's words that those who have power are often tempted to use it against the people and for their own interests! History shows us countless examples of this, and even in our supposedly more civilised times, where the democratic system of government predominates, this temptation has not yet been overcome.

In fact, it is deeply rooted in man. But God Himself offers us the remedy, in His own example: *"For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Perhaps by nature it is relatively easy for a mother to serve her child selflessly and lovingly. But even this "normality" is increasingly threatening to be lost.

In the "school of Christ" true service can be learned; that is, to serve as the Lord Himself. We know that even the disciples argued among themselves as to which of them would be the greatest (Lk 22:24), in view of which the Lord insistently instructed them: *"Anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant"*.

How, then, can we learn this selfless service, which, in the case of the Son of God, led Him to lay down His life?

One way to learn it is what we call the “imitation of Christ”... It is to internalise in our meditation the way the Lord acted, and to apply it in concrete situations. It may help to imagine how the Lord would have acted, or to ask him directly in prayer how we should act in this or that situation. God will not leave a docile disciple unanswered, and He will also correct him when he has misunderstood.

In this learning of the Lord's way of serving, we are offered another valuable help....

We know that Jesus united Himself to our human nature to such an extent that whatever good we do for a person, we do to Himself:

*“In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.”*  
(Mt 25:40)

Service to the “least of these” - that is, to the poor and needy - is a particularly appropriate exercise for acquiring the spirit of selfless service. In fact, we can connect it directly with the Lord. When we can expect nothing in return from people and only the Lord is our reward, service shines even more brightly and becomes truly great in the eyes of God.

There is yet another way to learn this attitude of service, which I would call the more contemplative way. It consists in an ever stronger and more intimate union with Jesus, in the way of following Him. The more this union grows, the more the Holy Spirit can work in us, the more natural the attitude of service will become. Then, as a rule, it will no longer be necessary to “train” by mere willpower, but to be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit and to put them into action.

Perhaps the result of this last form of learning - though it belongs rather to the supernatural order - can be compared to the natural care and service of a mother for her child. Service becomes natural, and can reach those heights of which the Lord Himself gave us an example.