

15. January 2022

Power and authority

1 Sam 9:1-4,17-19; 10:1a

Among the men of Benjamin was a man called Kish son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah; a Benjaminite and a person of rank. He had a son called Saul, a handsome man in the prime of life. Of all the Israelites there was no one more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders taller than anyone else. Now since the donkeys belonging to Kish, Saul's father, had strayed, Kish said to his son Saul, 'My son, take one of the servants with you and be off; go and look for the donkeys.' They went through the highlands of Ephraim, they went through the territory of Shalishah, and did not find them; they went through the territory of Shaalim but they were not there; they went through the territory of Benjamin and did not find them. When Samuel saw Saul, Yahweh told him, 'That is the man of whom I said to you, "He is to govern my people." Saul accosted Samuel in the gateway and said, 'Tell me, please, where the seer's house is.' Samuel replied to Saul, 'I am the seer. Go up ahead of me to the high place. You must eat with me today. Tomorrow, when I let you go, I shall tell you whatever is on your mind. Samuel took a phial of oil and poured it on Saul's head; he then kissed him and said, 'Has not Yahweh anointed you as leader of his people Israel? You are the man who is to govern Yahweh's people and save them from the power of the enemies surrounding them'

Today's reading introduces us to the vocation of Saul, who, as we heard in yesterday's biblical text, was designated by God because the people wanted a king, and God agreed to their will. Here, then, begins the often disastrous history of the kings of Israel. Already in the case of Saul we have to note that he does not correspond to his high calling, to the point of being rejected by the Lord (1 Sam 15).

It is a tragedy to observe how his disobedience to God's instructions and his jealousy towards David increasingly distort his being. In the beginning, Saul even experienced a trance and was overcome by the Spirit of the Lord (1 Sam 10:10-12), and was able to partake of God's close presence together with other prophets. He was also a great leader. However, all the graces that the Lord had granted him were not enough for him to follow faithfully to the end the way that God had laid out for him. We know that his end was tragic (1 Sam 31).

Again and again we have to perceive with pain that, not infrequently, when people assume positions of power, they change for the worse. We can see this in political

figures, who, in extreme cases, abuse their power to the point of losing their sanity. But not only in politics, but also in other circumstances something similar can happen, so that people do not use the authority given to them appropriately. In this case, there is a separation of two elements that should go hand in hand in the exercise of power: power and authority.

When this happens, i.e. when someone abuses his position of power, he loses the "inner legitimation" for the exercise of power, so to speak. Then he does not lead people as a good shepherd does; instead, his subjects submit to him in fear. In such a situation, not infrequently there is even rebellion against him.

True authority, on the other hand, even on the natural level, always has its origin in God and will seek to convince people rather than to subjugate them. It will only use power to the extent necessary to enforce just goals.

However, power easily corrupts. If one is not sufficiently willing to use it only in the Lord's sense and does not work towards this inner attitude, then it is difficult to resist the temptation of power.

We know the temptation of Lucifer, who no longer wanted to put his glorious gifts at the service of God, but to use them for himself and to build up his own dominion.

Through disobedience to God, Saul lost his authority, i.e. his inner legitimation and the right disposition to exercise it. Thus, he began to use his power without the authority to do so. This is the "raw material" that gives rise to tyrants.

Let us take a look at the situation today: In the context of the current crisis surrounding the coronavirus, many politicians run the risk of losing their authority, for example, by imposing measures that go against reason or even infringe on the freedoms provided for by national constitutions. This is the case, for example, with politicians who want to impose mandatory vaccination, without realising that each individual must decide for himself whether or not he is in favour of such a vaccination. The more politicians use violence - be it direct or indirect - to impose such goals, the more they lose their authority and run the risk of abusing their power with tyrannical orders.

Something similar also applies in the ecclesiastical sphere, in whose hierarchy power and authority must be particularly linked, because of the high calling they have received from God. Here, too, it would be a serious abuse of authority if, for example, priests were obediently obliged to be vaccinated, threatening restrictions on their ministry if they refuse. Any bishop who does this is in danger of weakening his authority, and, if he does not see reason, he may even end up depriving himself of it altogether. No one

may go beyond the limits set for any exercise of power, whether in the human or in the spiritual realm.

As a remedy to this temptation, Jesus gives us an insurmountable indication of what true greatness means: "*If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all*" (Mk 9:35). Whoever follows this direction and allows himself to be guided by the Lord, will know how to keep within his limits and refer all authority to God himself, who is its source.

Let us be very careful not to let ourselves be corrupted by power, pretending to be great and important for our own sake. Everything must always be at the service, everything is always a free gift of God and to Him we are accountable. Let us not abuse His goodness, whoever we are and whatever position we occupy.