

16. February 2022

Spiritual advice

Jas 1:19-27

Remember this, my dear brothers: everyone should be quick to listen but slow to speak and slow to human anger; God's saving justice is never served by human anger; so do away with all impurities and remnants of evil. Humbly welcome the Word which has been planted in you and can save your souls. But you must do what the Word tells you and not just listen to it and deceive yourselves. Anyone who listens to the Word and takes no action is like someone who looks at his own features in a mirror and, once he has seen what he looks like, goes off and immediately forgets it. But anyone who looks steadily at the perfect law of freedom and keeps to it - not listening and forgetting, but putting it into practice - will be blessed in every undertaking. Nobody who fails to keep a tight rein on the tongue can claim to be religious; this is mere self-deception; that person's religion is worthless. Pure, unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father, is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows in their hardships, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world.

We cannot thank the Apostle James enough for his counsels, which show us how to put into practice a true spiritual life. It is of utmost importance to follow such advice, for how will we grow spiritually if we do not put into practice what we are advised?

What concerns us today about the spiritual state of the Church is not the lack of intellectual skills, but the lack of deep spiritual life, so that we are weakened by the temptations of the world, the devil and the flesh.

If we listen carefully to the words of this reading, we will find several clear instructions that will be fruitful for our spiritual life. Let us meditate on one of them today:

"Everyone should be quick to listen but slow to speak and slow to human anger"

Logically, diligence in listening refers to valuable content, for which we already have to make a responsible pre-selection. Closing our ears to the chatter of the world - whether it comes from outside or resonates within us - is part of the basic discipline of an authentic spiritual path.

Our ears must be attentive to the voice of the Lord, which is communicated to us directly or indirectly. Here a wonderful word we have in German is borrowed: "lauschen". This means an inner attention, a concentration, which is directed to all that comes from God and to what is profitable for the journey with Him.

If listening requires an awake attention, we must also be vigilant about what we speak, so that the words do not simply gush out, but are thoughtful and permeated by the Spirit. The words we speak must be subject to certain spiritual criteria. For example: are they objective; are they free from resentment, anger and vengeance; are they uplifting or hurtful; clarifying or confusing?

We may notice that not necessarily all the words we utter are positive. The Spirit must transform us inwardly, so that out of a purified heart come good words. Some spontaneous and quick remarks reveal that our heart is still thoughtless and not sufficiently purified. Therefore, before uttering such remarks, which could harm the other person, we should inwardly perceive what is wrong and try to overcome it within ourselves. Hence, in the reading we are exhorted to be slow to speak, so that the words are sufficiently pondered and purified in love and truth.

There is another aspect to consider... If we are too quick to speak, without having listened sufficiently, we will hardly be able to carry on an objective conversation. Thus, we run the risk of becoming domineering, of centring the conversation on our own person, without having a clear thread.

Listening attentively and being slow to speak will have repercussions on our whole being, because such spiritual exercises teach us to restrain ourselves. Indeed, immediately after this advice the Apostle exhorts us to be slow to anger as well. How easily our tongue is inflamed and words escape us that would have been better left unsaid!

The purpose of restraining our words and anger is by no means to repress them, as if such unthinking or even evil feelings or words did not exist in us... It is rather to overcome them! We must be realistic and become aware of the negative emotions within us; but, once detected, we must restrain them through inner prayer and overcome them by invoking the Holy Spirit. In any case, we cannot simply give in to them, without commanding them, because then they would end up dominating us and possibly other people as well.

