

22. March 2022

A contrite heart

Dan 3:25.34-41

Azariah stood in the heart of the fire, praying aloud thus: Do not abandon us for ever, for the sake of your name; do not repudiate your covenant, do not withdraw your favour from us, for the sake of Abraham, your friend, of Isaac, your servant, and of Israel, your holy one, to whom you promised to make their descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the grains of sand on the seashore. Lord, we have become the least of all nations, we are put to shame today throughout the world, because of our sins. We now have no leader, no prophet, no prince, no burnt offering, no sacrifice, no oblation, no incense, no place where we can make offerings to you and win your favour. But may the contrite soul, the humbled spirit, be as acceptable to you as burnt offerings of rams and bullocks, as thousands of fat lambs: such let our sacrifice be to you today, and may it please you that we follow you whole-heartedly, since those who trust in you will not be shamed. And now we put our whole heart into following you, into fearing you and seeking your face once more. Do not abandon us to shame but treat us in accordance with your gentleness, in accordance with the greatness of your mercy. Rescue us in accordance with your wonderful deeds and win fresh glory for your name, O Lord.

What is a contrite heart?

It is a heart that has fully acknowledged its guilt, before God and man, and repents deeply. It is a heart that has ceased to justify and defend itself. It is a heart that has become totally soft and receptive before God. All its pride has been broken; it has given up all its securities on the natural plane. It has nothing left to boast of; it has nothing left but sorrow and regret for having sinned. This heart is willing to abandon itself wholly into the hands of God; to accept whatever comes from His hand; to bear all the consequences of its guilt. It is a contrite heart!

Perhaps it took a long time for the heart to reach this state; perhaps it resisted for a long time to acknowledge its own guilt... But now, by the grace of God, it has surrendered in that combat in defence of its 'self', and is willing to confess its sin without reservation.

However, the grace of contrition must not be confused with servility or with a certain resignation, accompanied by the feeling that nothing matters any more and that there is nothing left to lose; a state that could easily lead to depression.

No! Contrition has great dignity, and would be willing to do everything in its power

to make amends for the fault committed. Nor does contrition come from false fear of God or from diffuse feelings of guilt. Rather, it is related to the gift of the fear of God, and, even in all its humility, it can stand before God.

In the prayer we hear in today's reading, we are shown a clear example of this contrite attitude.

After having admitted sin, the consequences of sin are also acknowledged: *"We have become the least of all nations, we are put to shame today throughout the world, because of our sins."*

But this is followed by turning to God with confidence: *"Since those who trust in you will not be shamed"*. And then comes the resolution: *"Now we put our whole heart into following you, into fearing you and seeking your face once more."*

The prayer leads to a confident plea to the Lord, sustained by firm faith: *"Treat us in accordance with your gentleness, in accordance with the greatness of your mercy. Rescue us in accordance with your wonderful deeds and win fresh glory for your name, O Lord."*

So we see that contrition of heart is a great grace, and as the psalm so wonderfully says, *"Sacrifice to God is a broken spirit, a broken, contrite heart you never scorn."* (Ps 51:17)

It is good to ask for such a heart, capable of recognising its guilt; even if perhaps we have not committed the most serious sins. Indeed, we could also have a contrite heart for not having cooperated sufficiently with God's grace, for having missed opportunities to do good, for having neglected our obligations, for having fallen lukewarm in our religious vocation, for not having allowed the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn because of our guilt and negligence, for having let ourselves be carried away by thoughts of vanity and pride, for not having tried hard enough to overcome our venial sins....

We can achieve this contrition of heart if we consider what God could have done if we had been faithful to Him, if we had not been careless with that which was entrusted to us, if we had not put self-love before love of God....

Then the path shown to us in the marvellous prayer of today's reading would be open to us, and we could take up again with new strength the task the Lord has entrusted to us.