

2. April 2022

Innocence or naïveté?

Jer 11:18-20

Yahweh informed me and I knew it; you then revealed their scheming to me. I for my part was like a trustful lamb being led to the slaughterhouse, not knowing the schemes they were plotting against me, 'Let us destroy the tree in its strength, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name may no longer be remembered!' Yahweh Sabaoth, whose judgement is upright, tester of motives and thoughts, I shall see your vengeance on them, for I have revealed my cause to you.

Hatred and malice, perhaps mixed with fear, can go so far that it is not enough to kill the other person; one wants to erase all traces of their existence from the face of the earth and exterminate their testimony forever.

The reading we have heard today reminds me of the story of Saint Joan of Arc. This saint was condemned to death by an ecclesiastical court, incited by the English, on the charge of witchcraft. When she was handed over to the civil power for the execution of the death penalty, it was not enough for the English to humiliate her publicly by burning her in the market place of Rouen; they took her ashes, together with her heart, which had not been burnt in the flames, and threw them into the river Seine. They wanted to annihilate everything from her, because it was through her that God had brought the rightful king of France to his coronation, and through her he had defeated the English in war.

Yet nothing escapes the memory of God; before Him everything is unveiled. However fiendishly instigated hatred may rage, God will judge it.

The prophet Jeremiah, who was like a gentle lamb, became the target of such hatred because he did not adapt his message to the expectations of men, but fulfilled God's mission. This situation was difficult for the prophet, because the opposition came even from his own family; but he remained faithful to his mission.

After the coming of Jesus, we would normally no longer say that we want to see God's revenge against our enemies, as the prophet Jeremiah expresses himself in this text. The concept of 'God's revenge' has become alien to us, since the Lord commissioned us to pray for our enemies (cf. Mt 5:44) and gave us the grace to do so. But we can speak of God imparting justice in situations like that of Jeremiah. So, if we are confronted with such a reality, we can, on the one hand, ask God to do justice; and, at the same time, pray for the conversion of those who harm us.

In his innocence, Jeremiah had to experience the existence of evil, which was also directed against him. We must not confuse innocence with naïveté. Innocence is an attitude that knows no evil, because in one's own heart there is no such degree of malice. Of the holy Curé of Ars, for example, it is said that it was only in the confessional that he learned of the most serious sins. Innocence, then, springs from a fairly pure heart. In Jeremiah's case, the Lord Himself enabled him to discover the evil intentions of his adversaries.

Naivety, on the other hand, is a kind of blindness, which does not realise that evil exists. Therefore, the naive person is not wide awake and, in a way, remains in a somewhat illusory life.

For our spiritual life it is important, on the one hand, not to be distrustful of other people, because this attitude has disastrous consequences and closes our hearts more and more. On the other hand, however, we must not be blind to the evil that surrounds us. With this naïve attitude, we would not be able to measure situations correctly and can therefore react in the wrong way to what comes our way.

The Lord "*could tell what someone had within*" (Jn 2:25b), and was thus able to deal correctly with the situations that awaited him. This is precisely what we must learn from Him: to be aware of the dangers around us, without closing our hearts.

In this respect, self-knowledge will be a great help, because the more we know ourselves, the more we will be aware of all the darkness that dwells in the human heart, and we will know how easily evil deeds spring from it.

NOTE: To deepen the theme of self-knowledge, it would be good to listen to this lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYGsM602NXA>