

11. May 2022

The prophetic service

Acts 12:24-13,5

In those days, the word of God continued to spread and to gain followers. Barnabas and Saul completed their task at Jerusalem and came back, bringing John Mark with them. In the church at Antioch the following were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. One day while they were offering worship to the Lord and keeping a fast, the Holy Spirit said, 'I want Barnabas and Saul set apart for the work to which I have called them.' So it was that after fasting and prayer they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So these two, sent on their mission by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and from there set sail for Cyprus. They landed at Salamis and proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; John acted as their assistant.

In today's reading, we hear that *"In the church at Antioch the following were prophets and teachers"*, and we are even told their names.

Today in the Catholic Church we are no longer accustomed to speak of prophets. It seems that these figures belong only to the Old Testament. The Catechism teaches us that every baptised person participates in the kingly, priestly and prophetic function of Christ. Perhaps some of us are familiar with prophecy within the charismatic framework, and perhaps we reflect on the mission of the laity in the world in its prophetic dimension. But we do not know of prophets exercising a specific ministry in the Church. Perhaps those who come closest to the concept of "prophets" are the founders of religious orders or the initiators of spiritual movements. Perhaps one can also speak of a prophetic dimension in the lives of some saints and faithful, but we do not know - or no longer know - the term "prophets" as a specific vocation within the Church.

Evidently the situation was different in the early Church. The term "prophet" was just as natural as the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Today's text tells us that Barnabas and Paul were *"sent by the Holy Spirit"* to carry out the work He had destined for them. How the Spirit spoke to them, and by whom, is not described in detail here, but in any case they were left in no doubt that it was indeed the Holy Spirit who had spoken. Today, we are generally more cautious when we speak of the guidance of the Spirit...

But where do we find a prophetic spirit in our time that is not directly linked to priestly ministry?

In 2018, Cardinal Brandmüller, a German canonist, gave a lecture in Rome on the role of the faithful in the preservation of doctrine. Referring to the Arian crisis in the fourth century, Brandmüller said that at that time it was the laity who defended the true faith, while many bishops assumed false doctrine and contradicted each other. Quoting Cardinal Newman, he said that in this crisis the dogma of the Divinity of Christ was defended and preserved much more by those who simply remained faithful to baptismal grace than by those who had the task of teaching in the Church.

We see, then, that a prophetic dimension to the life of the 'ordinary' faithful is manifest here; namely, the defence of the faith and the rejection of error. This task is not only the task of the hierarchy of the Church, even though it should be the first to fulfil it, but also belongs to the "sensus fidei" - the sense of faith - of the People of God. This becomes effective especially in times of crisis - as in the Arian crisis - and certainly also in our times, when the anti-Christian spirit is not only at work in the world, but wants to penetrate the Church as well.

According to Cardinal Brandmüller, this "sense of faith" possessed by the faithful is not expressed in a general trend in the Church or in a kind of popular vote or poll, but becomes particularly effective in those faithful who strive for holiness.

Even if today we no longer know or identify prophets as we did in the early Church, the example of the faithful during the Arian crisis shows us that there is a prophetic task, which must be taken up. In this we can clearly recognise the work of the Holy Spirit, who encouraged the faithful not to be carried away by the confusion of their pastors at that time, but to remain faithful and thus to manifest a prophetic correction. Thank God the Arian crisis was finally resolved!

This example in the history of the Church, which is certainly not the only one, shows us that we must correspond to our Christian vocation in every way. Not only do the Christian faithful have the right to express themselves freely in the Church, based on true faith and love, but sometimes it can even be a duty to convey to their pastors their concern for the welfare of the Church. Here an important prophetic service can be performed, which should not be omitted out of human respect and which is particularly important in our times.