

16. January 2023

Learning obedience in suffering

Hb 5:1-10

Every high priest is taken from among human beings and is appointed to act on their behalf in relationships with God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can sympathise with those who are ignorant or who have gone astray, because he too is subject to the limitations of weakness. That is why he has to make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. No one takes this honour on himself; it needs a call from God, as in Aaron's case. And so it was not Christ who gave himself the glory of becoming high priest, but the one who said to him: You are my Son, today I have fathered you, and in another text: You are a priest for ever, of the order of Melchizedek. During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, to the one who had the power to save him from death, and, winning a hearing by his reverence, he learnt obedience, Son though he was, through his sufferings; when he had been perfected, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation and was acclaimed by God with the title of high priest of the order of Melchizedek.

By faith we know that Jesus fulfilled all that was prefigured in the high priests of the Old Covenant. Divine wisdom willed that the Word should become flesh. Jesus Himself, having stooped to the weakness of human nature, was instituted by God as High Priest. And He, who committed no sin, offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Thus was fulfilled all that God had foreseen for our salvation. Now it is up to us to accept this immense gift of God's love, allowing ourselves to be cleansed of our sins and to walk in God's ways as redeemed men.

"During his life on earth, Christ, in the days of his mortal life, with cries and tears, presented prayers and supplications to the one who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his filial piety. And, though he was a Son, he learned, by suffering, to obey".

These words from the Letter to the Hebrews bring to mind the Lord's agony in Gethsemane. There, when the weight of the Cross became humanly unbearable, we meet that face of Jesus who goes so far as to sweat blood in his fear and pleads insistently: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:39). The betrayal was about to be consummated, His disciples were unable to comfort Him and, spiritually speaking, the

whole burden of His Passion was already weighing on Him. Perhaps this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews has this scene particularly in mind, when it states that the Lord "learned obedience by suffering". Yes, Jesus submitted three times to the Father's Will, to drink the cup prepared for Him!

Learning to obey in suffering... This sentence contains a profound message for all of us, because it is relatively easy to obey the Lord when there is not much pain involved, when the grace of God is palpable and sustains everything, when we can see with our own eyes the fruitfulness of our work...

Yet let us think of so many missionaries who have brought the Gospel even in the most adverse circumstances, and seeing little or no fruit from their labours. How much pain will arise within! Perhaps even the question arises as to whether God's Will is really being fulfilled or whether all the effort is in vain... Obviously another quality of obedience is required here, so that these missionaries could simply continue their task, regardless of whether or not they saw the fruits. In this suffering, adherence to God becomes even deeper, because one really continues the work only for His sake, obeying Him, so to speak, "naked", without experiencing any personal satisfaction.

Even physical pain or other forms of suffering can allow us to learn this high level of obedience. In fact, there is a danger of inwardly rebelling against suffering, of considering it unwelcome, because we had not imagined such a situation of suffering for that moment in life. The acceptance of suffering, welcoming it as coming from the hand of God, leads us to the freedom of obedience; a freedom that we would never know without that specific suffering.