

4. May 2023

The attitude of the envoys

Jn 13:16-20

After Jesus had washed the disciples' feet, he said to them: 'In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly. I am not speaking about all of you: I know the ones I have chosen; but what scripture says must be fulfilled: 'He who shares my table takes advantage of me'. I tell you this now, before it happens, so that when it does happen you may believe that I am He. In all truth I tell you, whoever welcomes the one I send, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.'

The word the Lord speaks at the beginning of today's Gospel can keep us from acting proudly and on our own. Just as Jesus, being the Son of God, considered Himself to be sent by the Father, emphasising it again and again, so those who are in His service are sent by Him. Evidently the Lord wants to make this very clear to the disciples, knowing full well that we men run the risk of forgetting this and wanting to do things in our own strength and in our own name.

This relates to the original temptation of man to want to be like God (Gen 3:5), and also to the temptation that caused the fallen angel to succumb. God's wonderful gifts had been given to him for service. Lucifer, however, abused them, wanting to place himself on the same level as the One who had given them to him. We humans can fall into this same danger, and human history knows enough cases where people succumbed to this temptation.

So, these are two very important points to pay attention to, according to the words of Jesus: *"no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly."*

The first point is, as we have already said, a reminder that we are in service and that we are not to be self-exalting. The second point is to realise that we have been entrusted with a mission, and to become aware of the great dignity of the One who has sent us.

This realisation gives us courage in difficult times, reminding us that we live by the strength of the One who sent us. Indeed, God strengthens us in all situations, and so we can grow through the task entrusted to us. God's trust in us and the awareness of our responsibility towards Him keep us vigilant to fulfil our mission and, in God's grace, will also give us the necessary perseverance to achieve it.

The problem is that, along the way, we can lose that vigilance, so that we are more easily tempted to focus our attention more on ourselves and our needs than on growing in our relationship with God.

We can see this in the example of a religious vocation. In such a life, it is necessary to daily actualise one's responsibility before God, which is nourished by prayer and the fulfilment of the task entrusted to him. This updating will give the religious the strength to continue day after day, even if the road is long and he or she runs the risk of becoming exhausted. In this sense, it is also worth remembering that our life is to serve the glorification of God, rather than being centred on our own person, even though we can certainly also reap the fruits of a path travelled in fidelity. *"Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* (Jn 12:25).

The intimate union between the One who sends (and all sending comes from God) and the one who is sent opens up a deeper dimension. If we look at the Lord's disciples, we see that those who accept the message of those who are sent welcome Jesus Himself, who is the one sent by the Father; so that, in the end, they welcome the Father: *"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me"* (Mt 10:40). In this way, the sending of the Lord continues always, right up to our own times.

If we listen to the Church, which in turn listens to the Lord and is sent by Him, then we find ourselves in the most intimate union with God, from whom everything proceeds. Through these spiritual structures, the mission endures to this day.

The washing of the feet, which took place immediately before Jesus spoke the words we read in today's Gospel, shows us concretely what service we are to render. God's love reaches out to people. It does not appear powerful in the way the world understands power. It does not require means of coercion, but calls the disciples to humble service.

In the washing of the feet, the Lord established a sign to serve as a perennial orientation for the disciples. The one sent by God has to fulfil his mission in the right attitude. All those deficiencies and deformities of our fallen nature have to be overcome, or at least restrained: pride, vanity, anger, the attitude of superiority and of always wanting to be right...

Thus, the disciple will be able to fulfil his mission in the same spirit as the One who sent him.