

6. May 2023

## Remaining in joy

Acts 13:44-52

*The next Sabbath almost the whole town assembled to hear the word of God. When they saw the crowds, the Jews, filled with jealousy, used blasphemies to contradict everything Paul said. Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out fearlessly. 'We had to proclaim the word of God to you first, but since you have rejected it, since you do not think yourselves worthy of eternal life, here and now we turn to the gentiles. For this is what the Lord commanded us to do when he said: I have made you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of the earth.' It made the gentiles very happy to hear this and they gave thanks to the Lord for his message; all who were destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread through the whole countryside. But the Jews worked on some of the devout women of the upper classes and the leading men of the city; they stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their territory. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went off to Iconium; but the converts were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.*

This is the salvific order that God had foreseen: the first to receive the message of salvation were the Jews, whom the Lord had prepared so long ago. Imagine what would have happened if not only a "faithful remnant" had accepted the gospel, but a large part of the people, together with the religious authorities. What a great impulse we might have been able to expect, if the Holy Spirit could have moved many Jews with the zeal of a St. Paul and a Barnabas, making them witnesses of the Resurrected One!

As we know, things did not work out that way. The Jews not only contradicted the apostles who proclaimed the message of the Lord; they also reviled them.

The insults are something like a "prelude" to a curse. They are intended to usurp the dignity of the other persons, putting them in a dark field and making them suspicious in the eyes of others. One is no longer confronted with the content of their statements as such, and possibly not even with the person in question on an objective level; rather,

one has passed a negative judgement on them, and strengthens this judgement by all kinds of insults.

The apostles, however, are not intimidated by this; they give the correct response, which is to continue to boldly proclaim the truth. Although the Jews were the first and most eminent recipients of the Gospel message, the Lord did not abandon His plan of salvation for all nations when they proved themselves unworthy of eternal life, as Paul and Barnabas say.

*"I have made you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of the earth".*

Now the Gospel reaches the Gentiles and is received with joy by those who believe. It is the joy of the converts who have found salvation!

Even today we can witness this joy and gratitude of a person being set free from the chains of sin. Or also when the light of faith enlightens those who, in their search for God, had fallen into false doctrines. But it can also happen to those who already knew the faith, but never really lived it; or to those who were brought up in another religion and, at a certain moment, meet the Lord. What joy when they discover that it is He whom they had always sought! How great is the joy of a Jew today, when he recognises that Jesus is the Messiah promised of old!

This was the joy that flooded the Gentiles in the passage we have read today, and so the Word of the Lord continued to spread. This is how it should be: Whoever has found the fountain from which the water of life flows, cannot fail to show it to others.

But, on the other hand, the apostles had to experience that their opponents would not only remain in contradictions and insults. In fact, those who are capable of insulting others are easily ready to incite and instigate persecutions against them. Envy - and the contempt and hatred that usually accompany it - took hold of them and governed their behaviour.

But even in the face of adversity the disciples remained in the joy of the Lord. The Holy Spirit strengthened them!

This is an important lesson for all those who remain faithful to our holy faith and perhaps suffer prejudice, mockery and even persecution because of it. Let us look to the example of the apostles and, even more, to the Lord Himself. To Him we must remain faithful and turn away from any modernist deformation of the faith, without paying any attention to it.