

9. May 2023

“We must all experience many hardships
before we enter the Kingdom of God”

Acts 14:19-28

Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and turned the people against them. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the town, thinking he was dead. The disciples came crowding round him but, as they did so, he stood up and went back to the town. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. Having preached the good news in that town and made a considerable number of disciples, they went back through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. They put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith, saying, 'We must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God.' In each of these churches they appointed elders, and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. They passed through Pisidia and reached Pamphylia. Then after proclaiming the word at Perga they went down to Attalia and from there sailed for Antioch, where they had originally been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On their arrival they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith to the gentiles. They stayed there with the disciples for some time.

“We must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God”

The Word of God, if we internalise it, attentively, save us from many illusions. It does not make us sweet promises, as if we could enter the Kingdom of God by following our dreams and imaginations. It prevents us from trusting primarily in the power of man and wanting to build a kind of paradise on earth ourselves. No, the Holy Scriptures speak very openly to us, as we have also experienced in the Gospels. Jesus does not promise us a sweet life on earth, but speaks openly of the persecutions that await His own (cf. Jn 15:20). His life is reflected in His disciples and when we look at this we know that suffering is not simply taken away, but transformed and made fruitful through love.

Free from illusions, the disciples are to set out on their journey. Tribulations from within and from outside await them.

The joy of having found God and being allowed to serve Him is contrasted with our often still disordered inner life. Strange feelings and sensations can arise, real and imagined fears can beset us, unwelcome or even evil thoughts intrude, distractions steal our attention, we discover the depths of our hearts and how far we often still are from being what the Lord has called us to be.

But we must not be discouraged. It is better to see our sins, weaknesses, faults and errors, humbly carry them to the throne of grace (cf. Heb 4:15-16) and work on them, than to live in a kind of self-delusion and think we are already pretty perfect. These inner afflictions serve to anchor us all the more deeply in Christ, expecting salvation from Him and not through ourselves. They are part of the struggle into which everyone enters who earnestly follows the Lord. We are harassed, so to speak, by our fallen nature, which wants to keep dominion over us and tries not to let the soul live in the light of God. The devil does his part to increase the afflictions and hides behind them. This struggle is always there as long as we are on earth. However, there is a big difference between consciously facing it and simply being at the mercy of our inclinations. If we face it, then the afflictions become a challenge and a task. If we do not face it, then the struggle is already lost before we even become aware of it.

Today's text primarily addresses the external afflictions that arise from following Christ. It must be clear to us that persecutions, slander, hostility, rejections - if they are for Christ's sake - are both a sharing in His suffering and a testing of our faithfulness. Ultimately, all attacks of darkness are for Christ Himself. Now that the exalted Lord is no longer reachable by the darkness, it persecutes the Church, the disciples who hold fast to the true confession (cf. Rev 12:17). This is what the Acts of Apostles tell us from various angles in these days.

We should also not be surprised when rejection may come even from people who are very close to us. That is very painful! But our Lord even had to endure the betrayal of one of His disciples (cf. Mt 26:14-16). This can also happen to us in following Christ.

Let it be said again and again, and let it be brought to our consciousness. We are in times of special affliction. Self-evident truths are also being called into question in the

ecclesiastical sphere and those who continue to hold fast to the traditional teachings of the Church are easily pushed to the sidelines, in the worst case even persecuted. This must be endured for the sake of truth and love for Christ. These are real tribulations through which we must pass in order to enter the Kingdom of God. One must not be deceived: The way of following Christ is glorious and full of joy, but it is not comfortable and without suffering.

God uses these tribulations in many ways. In addition to the training of humility that is always necessary for us, and the opportunity to show the Lord our faithfulness, and to share in the sufferings of the Lord (cf. Col 1:24); the tribulations keep us alert to our journey. The tribulations remind us that we have no permanent place on earth (cf. Phil 3:20), that we are in a struggle until the end of our lives. This helps us not to lull ourselves into a false sense of security. One can live in a peace given by God within oneself, which, however, must be defended against attacks of all kinds. This is then a true peace and not a kind of self-sufficiency which makes us sluggish and easily inclined to arrogance.

It is important that we learn to accept the tribulations in the Lord. Every affliction and every suffering that we overcome with the help of God brings us closer to the Kingdom of God. This is how God has provided it for us and what He does is always perfect!