

14. June 2023

The grace of the New Covenant

2 Cor 3:4-11

Such is the confidence we have through Christ in facing God; it is not that we are so competent that we can claim any credit for ourselves; all our competence comes from God. He has given us the competence to be ministers of a new covenant, a covenant which is not of written letters, but of the Spirit; for the written letters kill, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the administering of death, engraved in letters on stone, occurred in such glory that the Israelites could not look Moses steadily in the face, because of its glory, transitory though this glory was, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit occur in glory! For if it is glorious to administer condemnation, to administer saving justice is far richer in glory. Indeed, what was once considered glorious has lost all claim to glory, by contrast with the glory which transcends it. For if what was transitory had any glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts for ever.

For St. Paul, the encounter with Christ must have been a shining light. Thanks to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures, we know his life quite well and we know that he became a torch that continues to shine to this day, instructing us in the same Spirit with which he was filled. Let us pay attention to what he teaches us in today's reading.

Paul and many others were chosen by God by grace to be servants of the Spirit; servants of the New Covenant. Paul never tires of pointing out again and again that, thanks to the New Covenant, a new epoch has begun for humanity, a time more glorious and important than all previous human history. Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, through His Death and Resurrection, the world has received a grace that surpasses the glory of the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was a way that prepared humanity for Christ. We can see it reflected in John the Baptist, who points to the Messiah and steps back at the moment when Christ appears. In the same way, the Old Covenant must recede in the face of the manifestation of the Lord, for it has already fulfilled its task. This does not mean that the Old Covenant is invalidated; it is eclipsed by the light of the New Covenant, for *"if what was transitory had any glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts for ever!"*

Now, how can we interpret what St. Paul says that *"the written letters kill, but the Spirit gives life"*?

We shall try to understand these words of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Let us remember that, in another letter, he himself says that the Law *"was serving as a slave to look after us, to lead us to Christ"* (Gal 3:24). The Law tells us what is permitted and what is forbidden. An offence against the Law was punished in Israel, so that it was clear to the Israelites that to choose God's commandments meant to live; while to reject them meant to die (cf. Dt 30:15-18). Serious breaches brought death, as happened to those who rebelled against God and Moses in the wilderness (cf. Num 21:5-9). The law of retribution - 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' - was already a limitation on the desire for revenge, but it also made it clear that an evil act had to be retributed in order to restore the balance. The Israelites wanted to earn God's benevolence through strict observance of the law. But it proved to be too heavy a yoke for the people.

With the coming of Jesus into the world and the fulfilment of His mission, the decisive thing happens. The Redeemer comes to meet us and takes upon Himself the yoke of the Law. He fulfils the Law fully and perfectly, gives His own life as an atoning sacrifice for all the sins of mankind and offers us forgiveness of sins. Thus, a new reality comes into effect, which can penetrate deeply into our being thanks to the Resurrection of Christ and the descent of the Spirit. Indeed, this new reality that Christ brought into the world can only be understood through the Spirit. It is true that the coming of a Messiah and the restoration of the Kingdom had been foretold of old, but only the Holy Spirit could give us an understanding of how these prophecies were fulfilled. Those Israelites who did not accept or even rejected the Good News of the Lord, remained under the yoke of the Old Covenant and its demands, and could not consciously receive the graces that God had prepared for them in the New Covenant.

But if the Old Covenant, as Paul said, was only the pedagogue to lead us to the New Covenant; and if only in the New Covenant those prophecies which refer to the messianic Kingdom find their fulfilment; then one is as it were stuck in remaining in the Old Covenant, instead of entering into the new light which God has made to shine. In a way, we could say that one remains in the letter and does not understand the Spirit that enlivens everything and makes man capable of bearing the yoke of Jesus, which, according to His own words, is a gentle yoke: *"Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light"* (Mt 11:29-30).

The Lord bore for us the yoke of the Old Covenant and transformed it into the gentle yoke of the New Covenant. This in no way means that the commandments are now no longer valid; or that the Lord no longer asks of us any effort to do what is right. Rather, it means that the Spirit of the Lord and the grace that has been given to us in Christ now enable us to live as redeemed people and to respond to this grace, in spite of all our weaknesses.