

23. June 2023

## The sufferings of the Apostle

2Cor 11:18.21b-30

*So many people boast on merely human grounds that I shall too. I say it to your shame; perhaps we have been too weak. Whatever bold claims anyone makes -- now I am talking as a fool -- I can make them too. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I speak in utter folly - I am too, and more than they are: I have done more work, I have been in prison more, I have been flogged more severely, many times exposed to death. Five times I have been given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked, and once I have been in the open sea for a night and a day; continually travelling, I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from the gentiles, in danger in the towns and in danger in the open country, in danger at sea and in danger from people masquerading as brothers; I have worked with unsparing energy, for many nights without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty, and often altogether without food or drink; I have been cold and lacked clothing. And, besides all the external things, there is, day in day out, the pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. If anyone weakens, I am weakened as well; and when anyone is made to fall, I burn in agony myself. If I have to boast, I will boast of all the ways in which I am weak.*

Thanks to this "unintentional vainglory" of the Apostle, we learn of the many sufferings he endured for the sake of the gospel.

Suffering for the sake of the truth of the gospel has a special splendour. Paul feels this pain and is not indifferent to it. He is not an epicurean, who wants to become insensible to suffering. On the contrary: he suffers with those who suffer, he reveals himself in his concern for the churches, he faints when one of his own faints. But his suffering is inwardly transfigured by love. "No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" the Lord tells us (Jn 15:13).

Paul, who has awakened to love, sees people through the eyes of the Lord: all must come to the knowledge of Christ, all must return to the bosom of the Father. That is why he is ready to take all these sufferings upon himself, and from this perspective they acquire their splendour. It is suffering for the love of God and for the love of mankind!

Certainly not many of us will be called to proclaim the gospel with the same intensity as the Apostle to the Gentiles, nor to endure such sufferings. But there is also the possibility for us to make our sufferings fruitful for the Kingdom of God.

To do this, the first thing is to learn to accept suffering. It is natural that we reject it at first. Our Lord also prayed in Gethsemane that, if possible, the cup might be taken away from Him (cf. Mt 26:39-44). This means that Jesus Himself was initially terrified of the suffering that awaited Him. In the garden of Gethsemane He even asked three of His disciples to stay with Him and pray. We know that they were unable to do so and fell asleep. The comfort that the Lord had asked for at this hour, before His way of suffering, was granted to Him by an angel who came down from heaven and comforted Him (cf. Lk 22:43).

This moment in the Lord's life teaches us that, in general, one has to go a long way to accept suffering. It is certainly legitimate that, at first, we ask God that the suffering may pass. But if we realise that He does not take it away, then we must learn to accept it and ask God for the strength to bear it. In this way, we can offer God the suffering, for example, for the salvation of souls or other intentions.

There is one more aspect to consider. Jesus did not receive the consolation He asked for from His disciples, but from an angel. For us, this means that we must realise that it is not people who can give us the deepest comfort, no matter how much we may desire it. But God will not abandon us, and will give us everything we need to get through suffering.

Let us look at St. Paul. In all the sufferings he recounts here, he does not speak of human consolations that he received. Rather, he endured his sufferings in God. It was He who stood by him and led him through the darkness of pain. That is precisely why his suffering shines with an inner light. It was God Himself who gave him the strength not to give up and to grow and mature in his capacity to suffer.

St. Paul would not have made all this known to us if he had not known the danger of unfaithfulness that his community was running, because they were being impressed by false teachers. But, thanks to his "involuntary vainglory", we know that the apostles were able to carry heavy crosses in the strength of the Lord, without becoming discouraged. This could help us to accept those crosses that cross our path, making them fruitful for the Kingdom of God.