

26. August 2023

A lesson in humility

Mt 23:1-12

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples, saying: The scribes and the Pharisees have sitten on the chair of Moses. All things therefore whatsoever they shall say to you, observe and do: but according to their works do ye not; for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy and insupportable burdens, and lay them on men's shoulders; but with a finger of their own they will not move them. 5 And all their works they do for to be seen of men. For they make their phylacteries broad, and enlarge their fringes. And they love the first places at feasts, and the first chairs in the synagogues, and salutations in the market place, and to be called by men, Rabbi. But be not you called Rabbi. For one is your master; and all you are brethren. And call none your father upon earth; for one is your father, who is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters; for one is your master, Christ. He that is the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled: and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a lesson in humility, knowing well how deeply rooted in man is the desire to be great and to enjoy prestige. Therefore, we can rightly describe humility as the fundamental attitude of the creature towards its Creator. It is a virtue that is not easy to acquire. It is worth remembering that Lucifer's real temptation was precisely pride, in that he no longer wanted to serve God with love, but sought to put himself in God's place. This diabolical rebellion and arrogation will be clearly manifested in the figure of the Antichrist at the End of Time.

It is difficult to acquire humility directly as a virtue, through certain concrete exercises. It arises rather as the fruit of a life pleasing to God in the following of Christ. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us guidelines for living this virtue.

In the first instance, the Lord presents us with the negative example of the scribes and Pharisees. They seek to be recognised by people. Their aspirations are not for God, nor do they seek His greater glory; they place their own person at the centre. Nevertheless, Jesus makes it clear that their instructions are to be obeyed, as long as they sit "in Moses'

seat" (in the ecclesial context we could say: "as long as they teach right doctrine"). At the same time, however, the Lord strongly warns against imitating their behaviour. We should always keep in mind this unpleasant attitude of the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus refers here, so that we examine our own behaviour and question whether we too are seeking our own honour. If we notice that this is the case, then let us take a step back and ascribe the glory to God through a simple inner prayer, which might sound like this: "Dear Lord, see that once again I have put myself in the limelight. But to you alone is the honour due!" If we learn to perceive our attitudes more and more, we will also notice more quickly when we give in to self-love and vanity.

Jesus' words that follow go even further. The disciples are to be aware that there is one Master, one Father and one Teacher. In other words: from God comes all true authority. Therefore, any authority on the human plane is derived from Him and is not valid on its own. This is how we might interpret these words, which constitute a further invitation to practise humility, for all too easily we give in to the temptation to want to be great on our own and also to be seen as such by others.

We can also put this into practice in a concrete way. If we notice that we are good at something, that we are acquiring a certain authority in a certain field, that people listen to us, then it is all the more important to remember God and to thank Him for the ability to instruct others in certain fields. If we understand this ability that has been given to us as a service entrusted to us, without losing sight of God, then we will know how to handle situations that would lead us to pride correctly. If we use the titles 'Father' or 'Teacher' in the Christian context, we must be clear that they are 'in Christ'.

At the end of today's gospel, Jesus gives a clear indication that synthesises this whole theme: *"whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled: and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted."*

It is very profitable to stir these words in our hearts and to bring them frequently to our remembrance. We should not simply overlook, much less justify, the pride and vanity that we perceive within us. It will be a great help to call upon the Holy Spirit, especially at those times when we detect our pride.