

27. September 2023

God chose the weak

1 Cor 1:26-31

Reading for the memorial of Saint Vincent de Paul

Consider, brothers, how you were called; not many of you are wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families. No, God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who by human standards are common and contemptible - indeed those who count for nothing - to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human being might feel boastful before God. It is by him that you exist in Christ Jesus, who for us was made wisdom from God, and saving justice and holiness and redemption. As scripture says: If anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord.

No mortal can boast before God!

How deep-rooted in man is the temptation to think himself great, without realising that everything comes from God! Even the disciples, who were so close to the Lord, to the One who is truly great, argued among themselves as to who was the greatest among them (cf. Mk 9:33-34).

St. Paul knows this temptation well. In fact, he himself was learned and knowledgeable in the Scriptures, so much so that St. Peter, the simple fisherman, says that in his letters there are "*some passages which are hard to understand*" (2 Pet 3:16). The Lord then set up a "guard" to keep Paul from falling into pride: it is a "thorn in the flesh", an "angel of Satan" - as he calls it - which batters him and which he cannot get rid of (2 Cor 12:7-9). Thus, the Lord preserves him from the greatest temptation: pride.

In this sense, St. Paul speaks to us today in clear terms about how important it is for the Lord that we become aware that all good things come from Him. The reality of vocations is a sign of this: they are often simple people, who do not count for much in the eyes of the world; not those who can boast of belonging

to a noble lineage, nor powerful men with great possessions. Today we could say that it is not the great "stars", nor the brilliant personalities of the world of politics and finance who testify to Christ.

It is not so easy to overcome pride. Sacred Scripture points us to service as the remedy: *"If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all"* (Mk 9:35). And today's reading tells us: *"if anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord"*.

In fact, when one serves, one has the good of the other person in view, and in this way one detaches oneself from that tendency to constantly revolve around oneself. Moreover, in service we imitate the Lord, who came into the world to serve us, the people (Mt 20:28). That is why true greatness lies in service. And the ambition to be great is not bad in itself. What is wrong is to pretend to be great for its own sake, which was the original temptation of Lucifer. Without realising it, people lose credibility when they want to be great for their own sake, when they are puffed up with all that they have achieved and want to continue to achieve great things out of themselves. When this happens, they live apart from the deeper reality, which should show them in many ways that everything comes from God.

If it is strange, not to say ridiculous, to boast before men, it is even more so to boast before God. It is profoundly absurd to "list" before God all the "heroic deeds" we have done. On the other hand, attributing to God the honour of our deeds is truthful, because "cut off from me you can do nothing" - Jesus teaches us unequivocally (Jn 15:5b).

However, there should be nothing artificial about this attitude, as if we were a kind of "medium" or a mere instrument that God uses, without our contribution really mattering; as if we were just a cog in the wheel, which can simply be replaced. No! All of us are called to do our part to make the work succeed. In one of His parables, the Lord even exhorts us to make use of and multiply the talents entrusted to us (Mt 25:14-30). But, at the same time, we must always remember that even natural gifts and abilities have their origin in God, and that it is He who sustains us, beyond our good will, so that we can accomplish what has been entrusted to us.

In closing, let us hear a few words about the saint whom we commemorate today:
St. Vincent de Paul.

St. Vincent always did "only" what was necessary, that is, what he saw to be the Will of God, according to the situation. He did not write books or work miracles, but he was humble and faithful; great in his simplicity. And if we were to ask him how he came to be the founder of the community of Lazarists and Vincentians, he would probably reply that he only did what he understood to be the Will of God, and that with the help of God. Without a doubt, he would attribute the glory to the Lord!