

8. October 2023

The fruits of the vineyard of the Lord

Is 5:1-7

*I will sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded rotten grapes.*

*And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield rotten grapes?*

*And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a wasteland;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds*

that they rain no rain upon it.

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his cherished garden;
he expected justice
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness
but heard a cry.*

What touching words of the Lord, how close He has been to His people since the time of the Old Covenant, how much He loved and cared for them, how tenderly He surrounded them to show them His love! The vineyard was to produce sweet grapes; fruits of love and righteousness. The glory of God was to be reflected in the lives of people... But, in the end, only sour fruit was harvested in that vineyard, fruit that had not reached maturity and had not been impregnated by the sun that gives them their sweetness. Thus the vineyard, which the vinedresser had sown to delight in its fruits, was not a source of joy to Him.

We understand very well that, with the image of the vineyard, the Lord is referring to His people. In fact, in the same reading He specifies it. And then He also points out the consequences of their actions. God withdraws His protection from them and, instead of being a flourishing people that glorifies God, they end up becoming a barren land.

How often this tragedy is repeated in the history of peoples or of individuals in particular! How often there were times of decadence even in our own history! But then came a new impulse, a time of conversion... and then again the danger of decadence, when the hour of grace granted by the Lord was not seized, when the world became too important and the divine commandments were relegated to the background.

Do we hold fast to God's commandments or have we become indifferent to them, or do we accept God's law unconditionally and obey it, or is the Church influenced by the anti-Christian spirit that has already taken hold in the world? The spirit of

relativism, which sees God's commandments as conditioned by a certain era and presents them as ideals to be corrected according to human reality, is spreading more and more.

Without overlooking the signs of hope, such as conversions and certain impulses and attempts at renewal that can be seen today, it is necessary to ask how God sees His vineyard, which He has sown in the world through His Church. Are the fruits of faith, hope and love growing in it? Is the Church still concerned above all and with all her strength with the fulfilment of the primary task entrusted to her, which is the evangelisation of this world? Or is it more concerned with the earthly dimension? An Italian priest, Don Nicola Bux, made this point some time ago in response to the question of whether the Church still speaks of God:

"After the (...) speech of the President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, more and more people are claiming that the Bishops are speaking like politicians, dealing with issues such as the economy, immigration, work, ecology, etc., when they should be concerned with preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. In short, they are dealing with things that concern politics, when they should be preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments, since their vocation is to glorify God and save souls. The Lord did not solve the problems of poverty, hunger and war, but preached conversion to God as a condition for solving them, though never definitively. That is why He said: *"You will always have the poor with you"*.

Could it be that the Church in our time is in danger of putting the temporal before the eternal, thus losing its inner strength and being threatened by sins and false doctrines which seek to infect and destroy the Mystical Body of Christ?

Nicola Bux's statement goes on to quote the then Cardinal Ratzinger, who already in 1985 lamented:

"The very concept of the Church is in crisis. It is seen as an organisation that has to take care of the body and not of the souls. But Jesus Christ came into the world to save souls from sin and lead them back to God the Father. He did not come to solve the economic and social problems caused by the Roman occupation of Palestine.

And Don Bux continues:

"From Che Guevara to Mother Teresa - as Jovanotti sings - a concept of the Church has spread in which everyone can continue to live as they please, without necessarily converting to Jesus Christ and without observing the commandments of God. All this leads to a loss of Catholic identity, also because a non-Catholic mentality has infiltrated the Church".

Certainly we must always care for the poor, moved by Christian charity, and we must also contribute to solving the problems of the world, but all this must be integrated into the great mission of the Church, which, as we have said, is the proclamation of the Gospel. The balance must not be tipped too much towards the horizontal dimension, because then we risk losing the transcendent dimension.

I believe that it pleases God to see us concerned to live in His grace and committed to witnessing to Christ. It is necessary both to proclaim and to defend the great gift of belonging to the Church. The renewal of the Church happens through those who strive to live holy lives in the world and thus witness to the holiness of the Church.

Will the Lord be pleased with the state of the Church? Is she producing enough sweet grapes or too much sour fruit? Are we a source of joy to God?

Only God will know how to answer these questions! For our part, we can strive to bring forth those fruits that we know will please Him: sincere prayer and authentic witness, accompanied by spiritual and corporal works of mercy.