

22. October 2023

Caution in the face of praise

Mt 22:15-21

Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

He who digs a hole to make others fall into it, ends up falling into it. This saying is used in Germany to refer to those who intentionally want to harm another person, but their evil purpose devolves upon themselves. It is also a common theme in fairy tales: evil plans and evil deeds are avenged, for the truth cannot be played with or manipulated.

If the Pharisees had heeded this "moral", they would not have tried to set a trap for Jesus. But their hearts were already closed to Him. Perhaps they thought they had the right to ask Him this question, because they wanted to find proof that Jesus sinned against their religion.

But their question was full of hypocrisy, and they gave themselves away already with the first sentence they addressed to the Lord: "*Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man*"

Jesus could have closed the conversation after this statement by simply saying to them, "If things are as you say, then you need only listen to me". For even though this was a preamble full of hypocrisy, they were telling the truth, only to make Him fall into the trap.

This passage shows us how the forces of evil work; on the other hand, Jesus' reaction teaches us what our attitude should be towards them.

The forces of evil often disguise their intentions and like to flatter people. Who would not like to be told that he always speaks the truth, that he is just, that he does not allow himself to be corrupted and that he teaches the way of God? This is high praise, and as Christians we aspire to these values! One could interpret such praise as a confirmation of the efforts made. It may even correspond to reality, as in the case of the Lord.

But spiritual watchfulness teaches us to deal prudently with the praise we receive from people. This kind of praise can feed our vanity and complacency, which have not yet been overcome within us. It easily happens that people admire and congratulate us when we do something that attracts attention. Since man aspires to greatness, we may feel that our personal value grows when we receive praise from others. But it is precisely at this point that we can be deceived. Even if the praise comes from a good intention, we must always be spiritually vigilant, so that all the good things we have done and all the gifts we have received in our lives are attributed to God, full of gratitude; and we do not consider them as our own merits.

Jesus - in whom there is no vanity whatsoever - was not fooled by hypocritical praise, and so was able to identify the trap that was being set for Him and respond accordingly. The Pharisees and Herodians were put to shame by His response, and we are left for all time with this valuable lesson about the distinction to be made between the things of this world and spiritual things.

To be able to react with such wisdom to a trap, we need to have inner freedom, so that the Holy Spirit can guide us.

We must protect our "inner castle", which is our soul, so that we do not fall into the traps that are set for us. We must understand that our value consists in being God's beloved children! Our dignity comes from Him! If we are aware of this, we will be able to react freely to human praise. If they are sincere and justified, we can thank the Lord and rejoice. If, on the other hand, the praise is hypocritical or does not correspond to the truth, we will not allow ourselves to be blinded, but will remain vigilant on our way.

In the Spirit of God, we may also be able to give the right response; a response that glorifies God and sheds light on the situation.