

14. December 2023

The violent are taking the Kingdom of Heaven by storm

Mt 11:7b, 11-15

Jesus began to talk to the people about John: 'In truth I tell you, of all the children born to women, there has never been anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. Since John the Baptist came, up to this present time, the kingdom of Heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm. Because it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and of the Law were leading; and he, if you will believe me, is the Elijah who was to return. Anyone who has ears should listen!'

The greatest among those born of women is less than the least in the Kingdom of Heaven! What a tremendous prospect for us! If we admire John the Baptist for the mission entrusted to him and recognise his greatness, how much more can we then rejoice in what awaits us in the Kingdom of Heaven, where all are greater, more full of light, more filled with grace, more deeply united with God!

If one day God, in His goodness, grants us to be eternally with Him, our communion with Him and His will be perfect. Here is a good reason to wait confidently for the hour of our death. Here on earth we have no abiding home; but we do have a mission to fulfil.

What is meant by the Lord's statement that "the violent are taking the Kingdom of Heaven by storm"? It certainly does not refer to exercising any form of illegitimate violence to impose the Gospel. Any forced conversion or a step towards God that has been provoked by psychological violence is in itself a contradiction.

But neither do these words seem to be a complaint of Jesus against the violence suffered by the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather, it seems to me that the Lord wants to point out to us that it takes a firm decision on our part to follow Christ under all circumstances. We cannot remain in a somewhat indecisive state, thus showing a certain lukewarmness. Faith involves making decisions, which we will then have to defend with courage.

Let us think of the martyrs... They did not do violence to anyone; but they did do violence to themselves, when they overcame the fears and apprehensions that hung over them.

Through these magnanimous acts, they somehow conquered the Kingdom of Heaven.

Precisely in these times, when anti-Christian clouds are gathering ever more thickly over the world, the strength of determination is needed, which we must aspire to and also ask God for. All false softness and false pliability must be overcome, so that our faith may stand firm, without wavering or collapsing under the onslaught of relativism.

The Lord speaks these words when He speaks about John the Baptist. He who did not allow himself to be bowed down by Herod; he who defended the truth and suffered martyrdom for its sake; he who conquered the Kingdom of Heaven.

At the end of this gospel, we find another phrase that is not so easy to understand. What does Jesus mean when He says that John is Elijah, who was to come? To this day, Jews (and also some Christians) expect the Prophet Elijah - who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kgs 2:1-11) - to return in person to earth at the End of Time.

From my point of view, the Lord's words here point to something else... He is probably referring to Elijah's mission, which had consisted in bringing back to God the people who had turned their backs on Him. This same mission was carried out by the Baptist, immediately before Jesus began His public ministry. Since the Jews believed that Elijah must come before the Messiah appeared, Jesus gave them to understand by these words that this "requirement" had already been fulfilled in John the Baptist.

Now, as we await the Second Coming of our Lord, I believe that witnesses may again arise to precede His Return and urgently call men to conversion, thus preparing the way for the Parousia.

This could be related to the two witnesses spoken of in Revelation chapter 11:

“But I shall send my two witnesses to prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lamps in attendance on the Lord of the world. Fire comes from their mouths and consumes their enemies if anyone tries to harm them; and anyone who tries to harm them will certainly be killed in this way. They have the power to lock up the sky so that it does not rain as long as they are prophesying; they have the power to turn water into blood and strike the whole world with any plague as often as they like. When they have completed their witnessing, the beast that comes out of the Abyss is going to make war on them and overcome them and kill them” (Rev 11:3-7).

We do not know how close the Second Coming of the Lord is. But we do see how many

peoples are living far from God; and precisely those who once carried forward the work of evangelisation are now in danger of sinking into the abyss. That is why witnesses like Elijah and John, who insistently call the people to conversion, would be welcome.