

13. January 2024

Power and authority

1 Sam 9:1-4,17-19; 10:1a (Reading from the Novus Ordo)

There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, the son of Abi'el, son of Zeror, son of Beco'rath, son of Aphi'ah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth; and he had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people. Now the asses of Kish, Saul's father, were lost. So Kish said to Saul his son, "Take one of the servants with you, and arise, go and look for the asses." And they[a] passed through the hill country of E'phraim and passed through the land of Shal'ishah, but they did not find them. And they passed through the land of Sha'alim, but they were not there. Then they passed through the land of Benjamin, but did not find them. When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, "Here is the man of whom I spoke to you! He it is who shall rule over my people." Then Saul approached Samuel in the gate, and said, "Tell me where is the house of the seer?" Samuel answered Saul, "I am the seer; go up before me to the high place, for today you shall eat with me, and in the morning I will let you go and will tell you all that is on your mind. Then Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him and said, "Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince over his people Israel?"

Today's reading tells us of the calling of Saul who, as we heard in yesterday's Bible text, was appointed by God because the people wanted a king and God agreed to their will. This is the beginning of the often disastrous history of the kings of Israel. Even in the case of Saul, we see that he does not live up to his high calling, to the point of being rejected by the Lord (1 Sam 15).

It is a tragedy to observe how his disobedience to God's instructions and his jealousy of David increasingly distort his character. In the beginning, Saul even experienced a trance, he was overcome by the Spirit of the Lord (1 Sam 10:10-12) and was able to share in God's close presence with other prophets. He was also a great leader. However, all the graces the Lord had given him were not enough for him to faithfully follow the path God had laid out for him to the end. We know that his end was tragic (1 Sam 31).

Time and again we are saddened to see that when people get into positions of power, they often change for the worse. We see this in political figures who, in extreme cases, abuse their power to the point of losing their common sense. But not only in politics, but also in other areas, something similar can happen when people do not use the authority given to them properly. In this case, there is a separation of two elements that should go hand in hand in the exercise of power: power and authority.

When this happens, i.e. when someone abuses his position of power, he loses, so to speak, the "inner legitimation" for the exercise of power. Then he no longer leads people as a good shepherd, but his subjects submit to him in fear. In such a situation there is often even rebellion against him.

True authority, on the other hand, even on the natural level, always has its origin in God and will seek to convince people rather than to subjugate them. It will use power only to the extent necessary to enforce just measures.

But power corrupts easily. If one is not sufficiently willing to use it only in the Lord's sense and does not work to achieve this inner attitude, then it is difficult to resist the temptation of power.

We know the temptation of Lucifer, who no longer wanted to place his glorious gifts at the service of God, but to use them for himself and to build up his own dominion.

By disobeying God, Saul lost his authority, that is, his inner legitimacy and the right disposition to exercise it. So he began to use his power without the authority to do so. This is the "raw material" that makes tyrants.

Let us look at the situation today: In the context of the coronavirus crisis, many politicians have lost much of their authority, e.g. by imposing measures that go against reason or even violate the freedoms provided for in national constitutions. These were usually the same politicians who wanted to impose compulsory vaccination, not realising that each individual had to decide for himself whether or not he was in favour of such vaccination. The more politicians used force to impose such measures, whether directly or indirectly, the more they lost their authority and were in danger of abusing their power with tyrannical orders. We are still waiting for a public apology from many

politicians, doctors, media and other institutions, especially now that the side effects of vaccination are better known.

Something similar applies to the Church, in whose hierarchy power and authority must be particularly bound together because of the high calling it has received from God. Here, too, it was a grave abuse of authority for a bishop, for example, to obediently force priests to be vaccinated, threatening them with restrictions on their ministry if they refused. Any bishop who acted in this way ran the risk of seriously weakening his authority and, if he did not see sense, of losing it altogether. The situation changes when he acknowledges his error and takes responsibility. No one can overstep the limits set for any exercise of power, whether in the human or spiritual realm.

As a remedy to this temptation, Jesus gives us an insurmountable indication of what true greatness means: *"If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all"* (Mk 9:35). Whoever follows this direction, allowing himself to be guided by the Lord, will know how to remain within his limits and to refer all authority to God Himself, who is its source.

Let us be very careful not to be corrupted by power, pretending to be great and important for our own sake. Everything must always be at the service of God, everything is always a free gift from God and we are accountable to Him. Let us not abuse His goodness, whoever we are and whatever position we hold.