

4. February 2024

The sweet compulsion

1 Cor 9:16-19,22-23

In fact, preaching the gospel gives me nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion and I should be in trouble if I failed to do it. If I did it on my own initiative I would deserve a reward; but if I do it under compulsion I am simply accepting a task entrusted to me. What reward do I have, then? That in my preaching I offer the gospel free of charge to avoid using the rights which the gospel allows me. So though I was not a slave to any human being, I put myself in slavery to all people, to win as many as I could. To the weak, I made myself weak, to win the weak. I accommodated myself to people in all kinds of different situations, so that by all possible means I might bring some to salvation. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, that I may share its benefits with others.

The apostle acts on behalf of the Lord. This is an essential statement. He who has accepted a mission from the Lord will not ask himself again and again at every crossroads whether he wants this, what is coming up to him, or not. He has basically said yes to God and has entered into His service. So he no longer belongs to himself, but completely to the Lord. This is probably how to understand the compulsion that lies on St. Paul. He fulfils his mission. If you like, you could say that this mission now rules over him, all thoughts and all inner direction consist in fulfilling this mission. He therefore places himself completely under this mission.

The Lord Himself is our great and unsurpassed example in this. Jesus Himself came to do the will of the Father. In everything and at every moment, the Lord fulfilled His mission. He did this out of love for His Father and for us.

It is the same with the Apostle Paul. Since his vision of the risen Lord (cf. Acts 9:3-6), he has lived on mission. This is the highest freedom he has given God, and therefore he does not need a new, free decision. His will is, so to speak, tied to the Lord, his freedom is already completely surrendered to the Lord and everything else is a consequence of this happening.

Because this freedom now exists, having given oneself completely to the Lord, and it has thus passed into the “compulsion of love”, St. Paul or other missionaries can make themselves a “slave” for all (cf. 1 Cor 9:19), i.e. they can see every situation from the perspective of how they can win other people for the Gospel. Out of this ultimate freedom they will find the way that the Lord has provided, because no way is too far for them, no cross too heavy and no task too big! It is the Lord Himself who works in them.

We gladly look up to these great apostles, and their dedication of life becomes a call to us:

What is my task? What is the premise of my life? Does it already have such clear contours? Do I already belong to God in this way, as it shines out in Paul? Or am I still wavering? Am I not making the right decisions? Am I still attached to different things? Have I already surrendered my freedom completely to God?

God has shown us the way of perfect love. He accommodated Himself to people in all kinds of different situations, to win us in His love. If we do the same, then our life becomes a mission: to proclaim God's love and to stand on behalf of this love.