

8. February 2024

May vigilance never flag!

1Kgs 11:4-13

*When Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ash'toreth the goddess of the Sido'nians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not keep what the Lord commanded. Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, "Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However I will not tear away all the kingdom; but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen".*

We are confronted here with one of the great problems in the times of the Old Covenant. There was always the danger of falling into idolatry, because of the proximity of many other peoples, who were generally still in blindness and whose knowledge of God was rather limited. As St. Paul will later make clear (cf. 1 Cor 10:19-20), it was to the demons, hidden behind the idols, that sacrifices were offered; in the worst cases, even human sacrifices.

Now, how could it be possible that Solomon, whose wisdom everyone admired, ended up worshipping idols and building altars to the gods of his foreign wives? God had appeared to him twice and had expressly forbidden him to serve foreign gods.

The reading itself gives us an answer....

Solomon no longer served the Lord undividedly; but gave his heart to the women, who thus gained power over him. He wanted to please them; and the memory of the Lord and His precepts began to fade... So we have to conclude that even the strong encounter Solomon had with God and the extraordinary wisdom granted to him were not enough for him to remain faithful to the Lord and His commands. On the contrary, he allowed himself to be seduced.

This passage should also serve as a warning to us! No one should feel too secure in following Christ, for seductions are manifold and some are not even identified as such. Any false security on the spiritual path is deeply harmful and also ignorant. Whoever believes that he is already humble and possesses many virtues, runs the risk of deceiving himself.

An antidote is true self-knowledge in the light of the Lord. When we read stories of saints, we repeatedly encounter the phenomenon that these people on the way to sainthood considered themselves sinful and evil. One might take this as an exaggeration, since their lives were often exemplary. However, the standard by which they are measured is different. St. Francis of Assisi once said that, if others had received the grace that was given to him, they would have made better use of it. The measure, then, is the love of God, and by that standard we all fall short. We need only recognise it, humbly admit it, and ask God to help us to grow in love.

Perhaps Solomon had forgotten more and more that his wisdom came from God; perhaps the admiration of other people made him vain, so that his gaze became self-centred, which is indeed the essence of vanity and self-indulgence. When this happens, God takes a back seat, the heart becomes more and more distant from Him and all the more susceptible to the charm and attraction of women. Thus his relationship with God weakened to the point of idolatry, for the heart no longer belongs undividedly to the Lord!

The same Solomon, whose humble request for wisdom was graciously heard by God; the same Solomon, who had built a house for God, becomes in his old age a promoter of idolatry.

We see, then, that the heart must belong to God, in order to be faithful to Him to the end with His grace.

Yes, vigilance is necessary, both on a personal level and in relation to what is happening in the world and in the Church!