

12. October 2024

The Law as a pedagogue

Gal 3:22-29

The scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

The Apostle Paul had to use all his powers of persuasion to make the novelty of the Gospel message prevail, especially among those who had been instructed in the Jewish faith. On the one hand, St Paul emphasises that the Gospel message is in harmony with the preceding Jewish tradition, that the coming of the Lord had been announced by the prophets and prefigured in their person. On the other hand, he also underlines the freedom given to us through faith in Christ.

In today's reading, Paul presents the law to us as a "teacher" and even speaks of it as a "guardian" under which we were prisoners... To understand this better, we must bear in mind the weakness of man, who is always in danger of giving in to his evil inclinations and falling into sin. How often can we see this reality in Scripture! It is an enormously erroneous and fatal assessment to believe that man would do good of his own accord, being at the mercy of his own nature. Our Heavenly Father knows our condition better than anyone else. That is why, before sending His Son into the world, He gives His people the Law. It reveals what sin is and allows the Israelites to feel the consequences of breaking it.

God establishes this Law as a guardian, so that man remains in its custody and is not at the mercy of his own inclinations. Man must keep himself from evil and walk in the ways of the Lord, so that he does not violate the great good of life and the image of God

in which he was created. For this reason, the law regulates many things in the life of man, and in a certain sense, as St Paul puts it, it also encloses him. This "teacher" - the Law - is to fulfil its function until the grace given to us in Christ becomes effective in us. From then on we no longer need this pedagogue, and it can even become an obstacle to living in the freedom that the Lord brings us.

For our way of following Christ, there are some important elements to discover...

We can say that asceticism and discipline are a kind of "interior pedagogy" for our spiritual journey, so that we do not allow ourselves to be carried away by those inclinations that limit the fruitfulness of our journey. Asceticism - that is, struggle - restrains our tendency to be carried away by the sensual and mental pleasures of life. The more we are caught up in them, the more necessary asceticism becomes.

Let us take two simple examples to get an idea: excess in eating (as an overflow in the sense realm) and excess in talking (as a disorder in the mental realm). Both damage our spiritual life. Whereas overeating tends to make us comfortable and sluggish, as well as damaging our health; over-talking affects our listening and inner recollection in God, as well as causing discomfort to the people with whom we live. Both examples are a different way of 'letting ourselves go'...

However, the 'inner pedagogue' imposes rules on us. In the first case, for example, it would prescribe a diet, or rather, it would admonish us to refrain from gluttony. The stronger these inclinations are, the more necessary the rules are, so that we do not give in to our weakness.

Something similar happens with excess in speech. If we do not restrain it through our efforts and restrictions, we will not succeed in controlling it so that it no longer harms us.

So we see that restrictions and rules are there to help us not to fall into disorder. But rules are not the end, nor do they have the power to sanctify us. Rather, they put us in chains, so to speak, until the grace of the Lord becomes so effective in our lives that we no longer need the strictest forms of asceticism, and we have found the right measure in eating and speaking, in the case of the examples we have given. Now we could apply the same to many other areas of life...

Perhaps these examples will help us to understand more clearly what the apostle Paul was trying to convey to the Christian community in Galatia. The 'teacher' of the Old Covenant fulfilled his task until the coming of the Lord. Now we are to live in the freedom of the grace that Christ has brought us. Through faith we are children of God in Christ Jesus.