

20. October 2024

Learning to serve

Mk 10:42-45

Jesus called the disciples to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

How true are the Lord's words that those who have power are often tempted to use it against people and for their own interests! History gives us countless examples of this. Even in our supposedly more civilised times, where the democratic system of government prevails, this temptation has not been overcome. In fact, it is deeply rooted in human nature. But God Himself offers us the remedy in His own example: *"the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"*.

It is in the "school of Christ" that true service can be learned, that is, to serve as the Lord Himself. We know that even the disciples quarrelled among themselves as to which of them would be the greatest (Lk 22:24), in the face of which the Lord emphatically instructed them: *"whoever would be great among you must be your servant"*.

How, then, can we learn this selfless service which, in the case of the Son of God, led Him even to give up His own life?

One way to learn it is through what we call the "imitation of Christ". It is a matter of meditating on the Lord's way of acting and applying it to concrete situations. It may help to imagine how the Lord would have acted, or to ask Him directly in prayer how we should act in this or that circumstance. God will not leave a docile disciple unanswered, and He will also correct him when he has misunderstood.

In this learning of the Lord's way of serving, we are offered another valuable help.

We know that Jesus has so identified Himself with our human nature that whatever good we do for another, we do for Him:

"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

Service to the "least of these" - that is, to the poor and needy - is a particularly appropriate exercise for acquiring the spirit of selfless service.

In fact, we can connect it directly with the Lord. When we can expect nothing in return and only the Lord is our reward, service shines even more brightly and becomes truly great in the eyes of God.

There is another way to learn this attitude of service, which I would call the more contemplative way. It consists in an ever stronger and more intimate union with Jesus, in the way of following Him. The more this union grows, the more the Holy Spirit can work in us, the more the attitude of service will become natural. Then, as a rule, it will no longer be necessary to "train ourselves" by mere willpower, but to be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit and to put them into practice, so that the fruit of the internal love that He has poured into our hearts may ripen (Rm 5:5).

In today's liturgical reading, according to the traditional calendar, the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians:

"It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11).

The school of selfless service makes us grow in love and gives us ever more wisdom to discern in God's light all that comes our way and to give the right loving response. It purifies our inner being and frees us from the self-centredness of our lives, so that we can serve the Lord and humanity better and more joyfully.

Moreover, this passage from the Letter to the Philippians is a powerful reminder that the "day of Christ" is coming, when our whole life will be seen in the light of God. May the School of Service prepare us to await that great day with confidence!