

25. April 2025

THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN

“The ministry of Peter”

Jn 21:15-19

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, “Follow me.”

How would Peter have felt when Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him? Was the Lord doubting his love? Did He want to remind him that he had denied Him three times before His death?

No, the Lord did not doubt Peter's love, even though Peter was still imperfect and subject to human weakness. Nor did He intend to humiliate Peter by reminding him of his unfaithfulness. On the contrary! Jesus was giving him the opportunity to atone for his denial with the threefold confession of his love, and then He was going to entrust him with the most precious thing: the care of His flock. Peter was called by the Lord to shepherd His own with His authority.

But he can only do this through love, and human love is not enough. It requires that love which the Lord Himself showed to His own, even to the point of laying down His life for His sheep. All those who are called to serve as shepherds in the Kingdom of God will only be able to exercise their ministry properly if it is marked by this love. Indeed,

ministries in the Church are not positions of political power (although these too should be exercised for the good of the people), but are services of commitment and charity appointed by the Lord of the Church. No one can ascribe this vocation to himself. Otherwise the essence of the pastor's ministry would be distorted.

The mission that Jesus gives to Peter, as presented to us in the Gospel, is a model of such ministry: the Lord asks him three times if he loves Him. No doubt He knows that Peter loves Him, but He wants him to confess it. Peter does not know that this is His intention and is saddened to be asked three times. But all three times he gives the right answer. Now Jesus entrusts to him that ministry which has been understood in the Church over the centuries as a ministry of unity, and which has been preserved as the Petrine ministry: the great service to God and to humanity.

Jesus indicates to Peter what awaits him and what this vocation entails. He, Peter, will give his life for Jesus. God has marked out his ways. In following his Lord, Peter will have to learn more and more to listen and obey another more than himself: the Holy Spirit. While young, although he will also think and act at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, he will rely more on his own strength. But when he will be old and will have learned to listen to the Spirit and to put himself completely at His service, it will happen as Jesus foretold: "You will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go".

This change of the Holy Spirit taking over all leadership must take place if we are to follow Christ to the end. Only then can all the fruitfulness the Lord has planned for us unfold. It will cost us our lives. It does not necessarily have to be the martyrdom of blood, as suffered by most of the apostles, but the slow death of our own will when it does not conform to the Lord's Will. The greater the task and responsibility entrusted to us, the more important this transformation by the Holy Spirit will be.

Peter accepted this ministry of love. He demonstrated his love for the Lord and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, fearlessly proclaimed and presided over the nascent Church. When he wanted to make false concessions, he was humble enough to accept Paul's public correction (Gal 2:11-14). He suffered martyrdom and thus showed the greatest love. Peter, who denied Jesus three times for fear of death, became an apostle who gave his life for the love of the Lord and his sheep. He fulfilled the word of the Lord: "Follow me".