

8. August 2022

True freedom

Mt 17:22-27

When the disciples were together with Jesus in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of man is going to be delivered into the power of men; they will put him to death, and on the third day he will be raised up again.' And a great sadness came over them. When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel came to Peter and said, 'Does your master not pay the half-shekel?' 'Yes,' he replied, and went into the house. But before he could speak, Jesus said, 'Simon, what is your opinion? From whom do earthly kings take toll or tribute? From their sons or from foreigners?' And when he replied, 'From foreigners,' Jesus said, 'Well then, the sons are exempt. However, so that we shall not be the downfall of others, go to the lake and cast a hook; take the first fish that rises, open its mouth and there you will find a shekel; take it and give it to them for me and for yourself.'

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a wonderful lesson about freedom. In today's case, it is a double freedom. First, the Lord explains to Peter that they would actually both be exempt from paying tribute. But, having made this clear to him, the Lord takes into consideration that this would be a scandal to others, so, in the second application of freedom, He declares that they will still pay the tribute.

This gospel passage is very reminiscent of what St. Paul says about meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:4 ff.). In his time, Christians could only buy meat in the heathen market. And the pagans, for their part, had consecrated their products to their idols. Paul then explains that in reality the idols are nothing in themselves, and that therefore Christians can consume this meat, at least those who understand it. But, at the same time, Paul is considerate of those for whom obtaining this meat might cause a conflict of conscience, because they have not yet come to this conviction of which the Apostle speaks. Paul's conclusion from love is that he recommends abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols, out of consideration for those who have a weak conscience.

This is the right application of freedom out of love for one's brother! It is a decision that does not arise from fear of what other people may think, and is therefore not a

repression of freedom. On the contrary, it is a renunciation of the concrete application of freedom out of consideration for others. We can speak of a "freedom of love", whereas the former could be called a "freedom of truth".

This is a very important aspect in order to preserve our freedom as children of God and to prevent us from becoming slaves of men out of fear.

First of all we have to examine the concrete situation in the light of truth, in order to have the right view of things. The next step is to evaluate how the conclusion we have reached should be put into practice, because we cannot always act immediately on what we have recognised as true, but must take into account the circumstances.

This criterion is often not sufficiently applied when we act. As a result, there are two dangers. On the one hand, there is the risk of becoming reckless and thoughtless, when we only act according to what we have understood, without taking into account the circumstances. On the other hand, there is the danger of becoming scrupulous, when we are constantly suppressing our personal freedom by thinking too much about the judgement - assumed or real - of other people.

Let's take a simple example to understand this better: Suppose I personally like to have a beer from time to time. As long as it is not excessive, there is nothing to object to, and I myself can decide according to what seems right to me. However, it happens that I find myself in the company of people for whom it would be dangerous to drink a beer, because they have a problem with alcohol or because alcohol is frowned upon culturally or religiously. In this case, out of consideration for them and for their sake, it is appropriate for me to abstain from the pleasure of alcohol. However, I am not doing this to avoid a guilty conscience, but simply out of consideration for these people. Thus, not only am I preserving my freedom to have a beer on another occasion, but I am actually activating my "second freedom" by refraining from something in order to avoid the scandal it might cause.

This example could be applied to many other situations.

There is one more point that we should take into account in this context, so as not to limit the gift of freedom and, at the same time, to practise true love.

We may encounter people who have a great lack of freedom in their lives. In their presence one cannot simply "be as one is"; and it is difficult to act naturally. On the contrary, one is tempted to be constantly considerate of this person, and possibly this is what he or she expects from you. In these circumstances, inner freedom is affected. Dealing with such people should be differentiated, and each situation should be carefully examined, to know when it is right to refrain and when it is wrong to refrain.

If we subject ourselves to other people's lack of freedom, we are not helping them, because they will continue with this lack of freedom without being challenged, so they will not be able to overcome it either. Nor does it help us ourselves in our spiritual growth, because in reality our consideration for the other person is less and less voluntary. In order to deal with these difficult situations, it is good to invoke the Holy Spirit and ask him for the gift of counsel, to recognise the right thing to do and to practice it in the right way.