

6. April 2024

The obligation to bear witness

Acts 4:13-21

They were astonished at the fearlessness shown by Peter and John, considering that they were uneducated laymen; and they recognised them as associates of Jesus; but when they saw the man who had been cured standing by their side, they could find no answer. So they ordered them to stand outside while the Sanhedrin had a private discussion. 'What are we going to do with these men?' they asked. 'It is obvious to everybody in Jerusalem that a notable miracle has been worked through them, and we cannot deny it. But to stop the whole thing spreading any further among the people, let us threaten them against ever speaking to anyone in this name again.' So they called them in and gave them a warning on no account to make statements or to teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John retorted, 'You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God. We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard.' The court repeated the threats and then released them; they could not think of any way to punish them, since all the people were giving glory to God for what had happened.

God often likes to entrust great tasks to simple people. This is the case with these two apostles who are now enlightened and strengthened by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Word. In fact, it does not take much study to pass on the essentials of the faith or to bear witness to Christ. Sometimes even too much scholarship can become an obstacle to expressing essential things simply so that people understand.

The leaders and elders of the people of Israel became increasingly helpless to stop to spread the faith. The fact of healing was clear, known to all, and not only that: they thanked and praised God for His mercy! How should they still intervene to avoid further harm from their point of view?

They resorted to the “last possibility” and wanted to forbid the apostles ever again to speak to any man in this name under penalty.

Now, through the apostles' response, we learn about their big heart that belonged entirely to God: *"We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard."*

Why could they not keep silent and avoid the danger of the situation?

It brings to mind another word of the Apostle Paul when he says: *"In fact, preaching the gospel gives me nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion and I should be in trouble if I failed to do it"* (1 Cor 9:16).

The apostles were so filled with the Holy Spirit that they could not and would not act against Him. Truth and love commit people inwardly and move them to word and action. God entrusted the apostles with a mission, they stand in a mission and it is the Holy Spirit who urges them to fulfil this mission. If the Holy Spirit meets an open heart and continues to purify it, then the person cannot close himself off to the action at all, because otherwise he would violate the innermost truth, because the message entrusted to him has also become his own. That is why the apostles speak of the impossibility of not passing on the testimony of Christ. This is also the reason why the Apostle Paul could not escape the inner compulsion of proclamation. He even says: *"I should be in trouble if I failed to do it"*. He knows that he is committed to the truth and that there are consequences for acting against it.

This message is also of great importance for us today! Those who have really come to know God and have opened their hearts to the Holy Spirit know that they are obliged to bear witness to the faith in the way they have been given and instructed. This is even a sign of whether the Spirit of God is working.

Another very important sentence is given to us in today's reading: *"They (the leaders of the people) called them in and gave them a warning on no account to make statements or to teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John retorted, 'You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God. We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard'"*.

This sentence, which can also be formulated as follows: "One must obey God more than men" (*cf. Acts 5:29*), is of great significance! All state and also all religious authority has a limit. It is subordinate to the authority of God, even if this authority is instituted by God. The danger of all human authority is its capacity for error, as well as the abuse

of authority. Therefore, there is no absolute human authority, even though some have arrogated such authority to themselves throughout history.

Man is first and foremost committed to God, and in God he can subordinate himself to the various legitimate authorities. However, should these demand something of him that violates his relationship with God and brings him into conflict with God's commandments, they are abusing their authority and are not to be obeyed!

This advice can also become very essential in today's world. It is not uncommon to observe an increasingly anti-faith spirit at work in some governments and laws that run counter to Christian convictions. Even if it is difficult to prevent such legislation, it is nevertheless possible not to obey laws that violate the commandments of God.