July 25th: Feast of Saint James, Apostle

Gospel text (*Mt* 20:20-28): The mother of the sons of Zebedee approached Jesus with her sons and did him homage, wishing to ask him for something. He said to her, “What do you wish?” She answered him, “Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your Kingdom.” Jesus said in reply, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?” They said to him, “We can.” He replied, “My chalice you will indeed drink, but to sit at my right and at my left, this is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard this, they became indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

“Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?”

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Today’s fragment of the Gospel narrates an episode that places us in front of a situation which is not unusual in the various Christian communities. Indeed, John and James have been very generous leaving behind their households and their nets to follow Jesus the Christ. They have heard the Lord announce a Kingdom and offer eternal life but they still fail to understand the new dimension the Lord puts forward to them. It is because of this that their mother is going to ask for something which is good enough, but which doesn’t go beyond a simple human ambition: “Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your Kingdom” (Mt 20,21).

Similarly, we listen to the Lord and follow Him, like the first disciples, but not always do we fully understand his message; we then sometimes follow our personal interests and ambitions within the Church. We forget that when we accept the Lord we have to give ourselves wholly and with full trust in Him; that we cannot think in obtaining the glory without having accepted the cross.

The answer Jesus gives them puts the stress precisely on this aspect: in order to have a share in his Kingdom what matters is to drink from his same 'cup' (see Mt 20, 22), i.e. to be ready and willing to give our own life for the love of God and dedicate ourselves to the service of our brethren with the same merciful attitude that Jesus showed. In his first homily Pope Francis emphasized that in order to follow Jesus we have to carry our cross, because "when we journey without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord."

As a consequence, following Christ demands from us great humility. From the minute of our Baptism we have been called to be his witnesses in order to transform the world. But this transformation will only be achieved if we are able to be servants of our brethren, with a spirit of great generosity and self-giving, but always joyful because we are following and making the Lord present.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- "For you, He says, talk to me of honor and crowns, but I to you of conflicts and labors. For this is not the season for rewards" (Saint John Chrysostom)

- "The temptation of Christianity without the cross, a halfway Church that does not want to get to where the Father wants, is the temptation of triumphalism. We want today's triumph, without going to the cross, a worldly triumph, a reasonable triumph" (Francis)

- "The redemption won by Christ consists in this, that he came 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt 20:28), that is, he 'loved [his own] to the end' (Jn 13:1), so that they might be 'ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] fathers' (I Pt 1:18)" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 622)

Other comments

"You do not know what you are asking… This is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

Fr. Antoni ORIOL i Tataret
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Today, in the fragment of St. Matthew's Gospel we can find many teachings. I will however limit myself to underline just one, which refers to God's total control of events throughout time: whether of all men together (mankind), or of each and every human group (in our case, for instance, the family group of the Zebedee), or of any individual person. This is why Jesus clearly tells them: "You do not know what you are asking" (Mt 20:22).

To sit at Jesus Christ's right is for those his Father has prepared it: “To sit at my right and at my left, this is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father” (Mt 20:23). Just like that, in a clear-cut way. There is an English saying that goes “Man proposes, God disposes.” And it is so, precisely because God is God. Or we could also say it the other way round: if it was not so, God would not be God.

Before this fact, unquestionably overpowering any human determining factor, at the beginning, men are left with nothing else but acceptance and worship (because God has revealed himself to us as the Absolute); while marching on, with confidence and love (because God has revealed himself to us as a Father, too); and at the end..., that grand and definite end: to sit at Jesus' side (whether at his right or at his left, it does not matter at all).

On our side, the enigma of divine election and predestination can only be solved with confidence. A milligram of confidence placed in God's heart is worth more than all the weight of the world put on our poor little scale pan. In fact, “James was not to live very much longer; for from the beginning he was inspired by great fervor and, setting aside all purely human goals, rose to such splendid heights that he straightway suffered martyrdom.” (St. John Chrysostom).