

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(2 Kings 4:8-11. 14-16 / Matthew 10:37-42)
28.06.2020

To prefer nothing to the love of Christ

Dear brothers and sisters,

In his Rule for monks, St Benedict exhorts us “to prefer nothing to the love of Christ” (RB 4:21). St Benedict did not invent this maxim but found it in the writings of many Fathers of the Church. Both St Cyprian and St Athanasius use this expression for example. It is obvious that this saying is a rendering of Jesus’ warning found in the first verse of today’s gospel passage: “Whoever prefers father or mother... son or daughter to me is not worthy of me.” I propose to take this maxim – to prefer nothing to the love of Christ – and to use it as a key for our reading and understanding of Jesus’ words addressed to us this morning.

Today’s gospel passage is part of a set of instructions given by Jesus to the apostles in chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel. These instructions are certainly very relevant for the ministers of the gospel. But they are also relevant for each one of us, whatever our status in the Church may be, because on the day of our baptism we all received the mission to bear witness to God’s love for the world. This is part of our baptismal priesthood. In a sense, each one of us who is a disciple is also an apostle; and so each one of us should be concerned by Christ’s words heard this morning.

St Benedict invites us to prefer the love of Christ to any other love. By “love of Christ”, he means not only the love we are called to receive from Christ, but also the love that we are meant to show Him in return, as well as the good news of the Lord’s love that we are called to share with others, bearing witness to the gospel by all our actions and every word we speak.

When Jesus tells us that “anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me”, we are spontaneously inclined to calculate and compare, perhaps thinking that here Jesus asks us to love Him more than our neighbours. In fact Jesus does not ask us to love Him more than our neighbour, but not to love our neighbour more than we love him. Jesus invites us to love Him and, in the same movement, to love our neighbour in the way that He, Jesus, inspires us to love them. If we love Jesus and follow his inspiration, we shall know how to truly love our neighbour in a way which is conform to the gospel. If we don’t love Jesus, it will be more difficult for us to love our neighbour in a way which is pleasing to Jesus and his heavenly Father. We are called to love our neighbour “in Christ” that is to say as Christ who lives within us inspires us to love them. There is no need for us to calculate, no need for us to compare. Our love for Christ and our love for our neighbour are indissociable.

To love our father and mother, our son or daughter in the way Christ loves them means that we have to respect them, serve them, care for them and help them grow; it means that we are called to help them become more and more who they truly are. To neglect them or even abuse or exploit them is to prefer ourselves to Christ and to them.

If we love our father and mother, or our son and daughter more than Christ, the risk for us is to make idols out of them, and to ask from them more than they can give us. How often we see parents asking their children to give them what their partner does not give them! How often we see children unable to cut the umbilical cord with their parents! All this may foolishly be taken for great love, but, in fact, it is a very selfish way of loving; it is not the Christian way.

“Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me”. Here we also have a question of preference. Jesus had received from his father the mission to reveal his love for all his children. In order to remain faithful to his mission until the end, Jesus took his cross. To take up our cross is to prefer to do God’s will than to do our own. We are so attracted to our own will! To choose to do God’s will, to choose for example to remain faithful in marriage, or in religious life, or in any life engagement can be quite literally a crucifying experience at certain hours! This is our way to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

We are all looking for life, fullness of life. Here too, we have to keep our priorities right. To find true life implies often that we have to consent to let go of our self-will, our human projects, our legitimate desires, in order to welcome the Lord’s will. In other words, we have to consent to lose what we think to be our life in order to find our true life, which is the life God wants us to live. To hold on to our self-will and refuse to take on board the Lord’s inspirations is to lose our lives.

If we prefer nothing to the love of Christ, if we welcome Christ deep within us and allow him to teach us how to love our neighbours, then our neighbours cannot but recognize the presence of Christ alive within us as we love them, and also to recognize the loving presence of God our Father in us because the Father and the Son are one. “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me and those who welcome me welcome the one who sent me”.

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me”. We touch here on the richness, the beauty often hidden of the mystery of hospitality. When we welcome someone, we welcome Christ who is living within that person. We have a beautiful example of hospitality in our first reading where we see the prophet Elisha received by the woman of Shunem. This woman recognizes that Elisha is a Holy Man. She will be blessed for her recognition. She who was old and barren will soon bear a son. The person who recognizes the presence of Christ in his neighbour cannot but be blessed, rewarded.

Let us not be afraid to come back day after day to the presence of Christ within us and to allow him to teach us how to love. This is the way we are called to prefer nothing to the love of Christ. This is the way to truly love our neighbours, to love them in Christ, a way that is in accord with God’s own heart. Amen.