

2. Prayer as secret of our joy

Deep down, it is the same thing on the lips of Jesus to ask us to pray always, without tiring, with faith, and to ask us: “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). Indeed, Jesus asks us to seek the kingdom of God after having taught the “Our Father” (cf. Mt 6:9–13) and having insisted on our trusting in the Father who sees us in secret and concerns himself with us as he does with the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field (cf. Mt 6:14–34).

Right in the middle of this discourse Jesus refers to the treasure of the heart: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:19–21)

This word asks us about the value that we give to this relationship with God in whom we can live all and to whom we can entrust all. If we pray little or badly, let’s admit it, it is not because we do not have time or strength to pray, but because basically we are not convinced that we find the treasure of our heart in the relationship with the Lord. For if we were truly aware that pray makes our heart stay in the treasure of heaven, we would pray like we breathe, as we eat or sleep. We never reject what is vital. And yet we often reject our relationship with the Lord who “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” and in whom “we live and move and have our being,” as St. Paul explains to the pagans of Athens (Acts 17:25, 28).

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21). What does this mean? What does it mean to have our heart where our treasure is, and above all where we have a “treasure in heaven”?

To understand this it is basically enough to reread the episode of the rich young man who rejects following Jesus because he does not want to separate himself from his “treasures on earth.” Jesus had told him: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!” (Mt 19:21). But “when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (19:22).

The sadness of the rich young man reveals to us in negative something that the whole Gospel always speaks to us about, and that is that the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God” is our joy, is the true joy of our heart. What is truly at risk when we are counseled to be detached from goods of the earth to give them to the poor is not particularly poverty or generosity but joy. The treasures of the earth are not the joy of our heart. We are made for a different joy, for a joy that does not depend on that which we have or obtain on this earth, but on a reality that is “of Heaven,” that is in Heaven, on a reality that is of God, in God. The problem of our joy

is not in what we leave, even if we make great effort to leave it, but in that which we are called to find, and which is granted to us. The passage from the treasures of the earth to the treasure of heaven is not like exchanging one currency for another, like euros for dollars. There is no comparison between the treasures of earth and the treasure of heaven. When we exchange money to another currency, or when we sell a good for a determined price, normally the two things have the same value, unless someone is tricking us. On the other hand, the exchange between the treasures of the earth and that of heaven is totally out of proportion, does not have any possibility of comparison. The treasure in heaven is worth all and more than all, it has an infinite, eternal value.

Jesus makes us understand this in another word from the Gospel: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Mt 16:26). What does this mean? It means that the value of life is not measured by the treasures of the earth but only by the treasure of heaven. Only in the kingdom of God does our life find its true value, a value without comparison. Which? What Jesus has announced just before this word, arousing the opposition of Peter: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Mt. 16:21). The value of our life is that God gives his own for us, that he dies on the cross for us and rises.

The rich young man has renounced this treasure to cling to his treasures of the earth and of earth, his treasures of sand, of dust. And thus he renounced the joy of his heart, an infinite and eternal joy that God was reserving for him from eternity: the joy of being with Christ, of being with God, not only on earth but eternally, in Heaven.

But it important to consider more deeply what it means that our joy corresponds to the treasure in heaven that Jesus promises us. This does not mean that we cannot be happy on earth. The question is not so much *where* we are happy, but *which happiness, which joy* are we granted to experience, both on earth as in heaven, both during this life and after our death. The question is whether we want a true and eternal joy or a joy that ends, that is consumed, that the moth and rust consume, that the thieves steal (cf. Mt 6:19).

At times, when I confront certain problems with communities, I realize that, deep down, behind so many talks and discussions, the true problem is that the joy of the hearts of many monks and nuns is not truly the treasure of heaven but rather so many treasures of the earth. And the sign is sadness, that joy is not breathed forth, that the joy of the kingdom of heaven does not irradiate from that community, or from those people.

For this reason it seems ever more urgent to me, for the good of our communities and of the Order, but I would say above all for the good of the world, which especially needs Christians who bear witness to the treasures that nothing can corrupt, to joys that nothing can sadden, it is important to understand how the rich young man too could have chosen the treasure of heaven and thus an infinite joy. And here we return to the theme of prayer. In what sense? Because after the sad departure of this young man, Jesus invites the disciples first of all to examine themselves: "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Mt 19:23-24). The disciples are afraid because they know that they too are always clinging to that earthly treasure: "Who then can be saved?" (19:25). But Jesus looks at them and gives hope back to them by inviting them not to count on themselves, but on God: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (19:26). And this is where the theme of prayer returns, of true prayer, as the secret of our joy, of the fullness, possible from now on, of our hearts that are wounded and incapable of being saved on their own.