

8. Drinking the cup of Christ

Jesus was never bothered that his disciples were full of limitations and were incapable of changing. He was saddened and troubled to see that they presumed to do it on their own, that they considered themselves capable of giving their life for Him with their own strength, thus going straight toward failure, infidelity, the cowardly betrayal, as it was for Peter, of their vocation to follow Him with trust.

Like when the sons of Zebedee present themselves before Jesus accompanied by their mother to ask to have the first places in the Kingdom of heaven after Jesus, that is, to be at his right and his left (cf. Mt 20:20ff.). Who knows whether, if Jesus had granted it to them, they might not have found themselves arguing among themselves in heaven about who should sit at the right and who at the left! Ambition, in fact, never finds rest, it always sees a better place than its own to be conquered. We too, psychologically are often driven by some “mother” or “father” who whisper to us that we are not held in high enough esteem, that we should put ourselves forward, obtain a promotion.

In this scene, Jesus wastes no time discussing with the ambitious mother, also because he knows that mothers are just like this, and in them it is just as well that they want the best for their children. Jesus, however, has called James and John to follow him, and he is concerned for their vocation and their truth in following it. Jesus wants to be followed in truth. He knows that, if one follows him badly, he can end up betraying it and hanging himself like Judas. Judas certainly had a good apostolic vocation, because Jesus himself called him, and who better than Christ could discern a vocation? But he did not let Christ teach him to follow him and help him live out a real conversion from the pursuit of his own interests to the pursuit of those of Jesus. This led to the failure of Judas’s vocation.

For this reason, Jesus immediately sets James and John back on the right track: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” (Mt 20:22).

They respond right away, without hesitation: “We can!” They are young, enthusiastic, presumptuous, certainly generous. Not only do they not know what they are asking, but they do not know what they can truly promise either. They do not know what it means to drink the cup of Jesus. Of course, drinking of the same cup is a sign of communion, of friendship, it signifies sharing in the same destiny. But James and John, like not even the other apostles, do not know that to share in the destiny of Christ means drinking with Him the cup of the Passion, that which Jesus himself will work hard to accept from the hands of the Father: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Mt 26:39).

We note that Jesus does not embarrass the enthusiasm of the two disciples: “You will drink my cup” (Mt 20:23). He does not add, however, that they will not be able to drink it with their own strength, but through the grace of the Spirit that they will receive after Christ will have drunk it first and by himself, abandoned by them all, the cup of the Passion even to death on a Cross.

Psalm 115 has always struck me: “How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I will raise; I will call on the name of the Lord. My vows to the Lord I will fulfill before all his people. How precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful” (Ps 115:12–15).

It is a prophecy of our Eucharistic participation in the Passion of Christ. We have received everything from the Lord. How can we be truly grateful to him? How can we render anything unto Him who has already given us all that we have and are? Our gratitude to God can never be other than a “giving thanks,” a “giving back,” a “restituting” to Him of what we have received, all that we have and are. But now we know that the Father has given us his Son, he has given him to us in the Incarnation and redemptive Passion, and so we truly do have something infinitely precious to offer to the Father to thank him for everything, to render everything unto him: the Son himself, offered in the Bread and Wine, offered in the cup of Salvation, calling upon the name of the Lord, adoring his Presence.

Only within this mystery can we then say with truth: “Yes, we can drink the cup of Christ, we can participate in the destiny of Christ, we can die with Him!” But not because we are capable of it, like James and John believed, like Peter believed. We can do it because Christ has already offered all by dying for us, he has suffered our suffering, he has undergone our solitude, he has experienced our desperation, he died of our death. The “death of his faithful” that Psalm 115 sings of, our death, our sacrifice, our suffering, all is truly precious because it has all been drunk in His cup: He has already suffered our suffering, he was abandoned in our solitude, he sweat the blood of our agony, he died of our death, my death, the death of each of us, the death of every human being, of every sinner. Now we can no longer die of just our death: now we can die of our death that has been lived by Christ on the Cross, of his and our salvific death. We can no longer suffer only of our own suffering, or be alone and abandoned only in our solitude. We have the impression that it is so, but it is no longer true. Our death, our suffering, our abandoned solitude, our desperation – Christ has made them all His own. Like life, after all. We can no longer limit ourselves to living our life, for Christ has already lived our life, has made it entirely His own, and it is like there were no longer any space of life for us except in the life of Christ, except in Christ who has assumed our whole life. As St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “For God has ... destined us ... to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thess 5:9–10).

It is on this basis that we must understand our vows and vocational commitments, and the true sacrifice that they ask of us: “My vows to the Lord I will fulfill before all his people. How precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful” (Ps 115:14–15).