

2. Called friends

From the use of the term “friend, playmate” in the passages of Matthew that we have seen, we must first of all understand that, with them, Jesus focuses on the topic of the response that He receives to the proposal that he came to express in the world. In these passages of the Gospel, Jesus thinks especially of the disappointing response of the people of Israel to his coming, but now this holds true for each of us, for the coming of Christ to each of us and for the call that he addresses to us personally. Such that, what Jesus expresses in the three parables – of the rascals who play and sing and do not get a reaction, of the workers who murmur in the face of the graciousness of the master, and of the wedding guest who goes without a wedding garment – is realized in actuality when Judas, one of the Apostles, betrays Jesus, kisses him to hand him over and hears it said by Jesus: “Friend, why have you come?”

Judas represents each person who disappoints Christ’s call, who disappoints it especially in its total gratuity, as gift, as privilege, as preference. For each of us the call to follow Christ, the call of our vocation, and especially the call of Baptism, before being a task, is a grace, is a gift, is the gift of Christ to our life, a gift that He makes to us and a gift that he makes of himself, that is, the gift of his presence, of his friendship, of his company, of the beauty of being with Him. To be called to follow Jesus Christ is a call to be with Him at each step of life. It is the call to receive the gift of Christ’s presence at each step, and this is the greatest privilege, an immense and eternal gift. Only a fidelity without end corresponds to the grace of being called by the Lord.

For that reason, when Jesus says, “Friend, why have you come?”, we understand that the word “friend” here is not, as in the other passages of the Gospel of Matthew, just a term of contractual relation or of rules to observe: in the mouth of Christ it expresses a real and deep friendship. In the mouth of Jesus and addressed to one of his disciples, one whom Jesus chose personally to be with Him, this term is no longer formal: it truly expresses Jesus’s preferential love for Judas. And it expresses it as a last attempt to remind Judas of this love, this friendship. Jesus puts Judas in front of what he is truly betraying, what he is handing over to the enemies of Jesus and to the number one enemy of God: Satan.

Joining to this epithet “friend” the question “*ad quid venisti?* – why have you come?”, Jesus invites Judas to reconsider his intentions, his decision, his choice, his feelings, basically: he invites him to take his freedom back in hand, to take back up an awareness of his freedom in light of his vocation as a friend of Christ.

This is a fundamental point for every Christian vocation. For this reason St. Benedict returns to it in the Rule right in chapter 60 when he is treating the vocation of a priest who feels called to become a monk, to live in a monastery. It is as if this priest

wanted to enter into the garden of Gethsemane to live alongside Jesus and his disciples a life of intimate friendship, prayer, relationship with the Father, but also of temptation, of struggle to remain with Him, faithful till the end to the will of the Father to save the world, taking up the Cross with Christ and following him.

This priest feels drawn to this, to this profound and essential dimension of every Christian life, which the monastery should help one live with greater fidelity and constancy. The point is not to enter into the garden of Eden before original sin, but into the garden in which the relationship with Jesus is called to follow him to the deepest feelings of his heart, sad but ardent with love for the Father and for all humanity in need of salvation. Only if he desires this, if he feels drawn by this, does it make sense for a priest, like every other person who feels called to the monastery, to ask for admission into the monastic community.

So the question that the Rule asks him is very pressing: "*Amice, ad quid venisti?*" In fact he invites us to examine our intentions in light of our friendship with Christ. "*Ad quid venisti?*" should be translated: "Toward what have you come? To what end have you come? Reaching toward what are you are?"

We think that the "why" indicates the originating cause, the first cause of a thing or an action. Instead, the preposition "for" united to "what" designates rather the final cause, the end for which a thing exists or is done. It is the literal transposition of *ad quid*. "*Ad quid venisti?*" should be translated: Toward what have you come, with what end have you come? But putting the term "friend" beforehand, it is as if Jesus asked Judas a rhetorical question, because Judas's response has been clear for a while: Judas has come, is there, knows Jesus, knows the garden, can kiss Jesus and so betray him *because Jesus has offered him his friendship, because Jesus has called him to friendship with Him*.

Friendship with Jesus asks for friendship, it is a love that asks for love. Even if he comes to betray him, Judas has come and is with Jesus, because he has been called and drawn by friendship with Christ and by the deep communion that this friendship offers and demands. God's friendship has no change of mind. Jesus remains faithful in eternity to the relationship of friendship that he came to offer us. And if we refuse him, if we betray him, our freedom will remain eternally as it were burned by the rejection of the infinite love of God. If there is an eternal damnation, it can be nothing other than an eternal regret for not accepting an infinite love. Hell flees the love of God, to which we are drawn from the very instant of our creation.

St. Benedict insists on citing here and in this way this phrase of Jesus to Judas to make us understand that for him our vocation coincides with the response to the call of Christ to be his friends. It is as if he suggested to us that we should always make a basic check-in on how we are living out our vocation, to verify that it consists exactly in letting Jesus ask us point-blank, in the midst maybe of a moment of distraction or of infidelity, or even of betrayal like for Judas: "My friend, my beloved, for what have you come here?"

This is the test that St. Bernard always submitted himself to as a novice and which then he would propose to his monks: “*Bernarde, Bernarde, ad quid venisti?* – Bernard, Bernard, why have you come?”, taking seriously both the Gospel and the Rule of St. Benedict.

It is significant that, recounting this in the *Vita prima* of St. Bernard, William of Saint-Thierry joins the reminiscence of the question asked by Jesus to Judas with the allusion to the great biblical callings in which God pronounces two times the name of the person whom he calls to emphasize that he is calling exactly him or her to a conversion, to a new life. It is enough to think of the call of Abraham, of Moses, of Samuel, of Martha, or of Saul of Tarsus (cf. Gen 22:11; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3:10; Lk 10:41; Acts 9:4).

What does this mean? It means that the test about how we are living, how we are doing and how we are, is a test we must always make while remembering the Lord’s call, the moment in which we felt called by name, precisely us and not someone else. We cannot have a true judgment on how we are living without letting ourselves be illuminated, and maybe pierced, by the call of God to go along with his friendship to do his will willingly, to follow his path joyfully and to live his life.