

Birkenhead, Sunday 22nd January 2023

4th Sunday after Epiphany

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“The boat was covered by the waves; but He was asleep”¹

This quotation from this morning’s Gospel could be said of many situations in the past, or in the present time about the history of the Church, of the World, but also about the story of our own spiritual life. With this quotation, people without Hope can easily ask the following question which becomes so recurrent today, with the exponential loss of Faith in our society: why God allows all that evil to happen to me, to the world, to the poor people?

In time of tribulation, we often feel alone, without any lifeguard to protect us, ready to fall at the very first slight attack of our enemy. Let’s learn today from the father of all hermits, St Anthony of Egypt:

As he went under several attacks of the devil, but resisted the assaults with great courage, he finally saw a light shining in the darkness of his hermitage. St Anthony asked: “Where were you, O Lord?”. And a voice answered: “I was there, Anthony, but I was waiting to observe your battle. As you did fight victoriously against the temptations, I will always be your Helper.”²

This image of St Anthony fighting apparently alone in the desert looks like the battlefield of spiritual life, but at the second battle is over, the real spiritual soul sees someone nearby, waiting in silence to be noticed, who was already present, assisting and supporting during that battle: Our Lord Saviour Jesus-Christ, Who will never fail us in such instants.

Temptation, adversity and spiritual battle is allowed by God to force in a way our spiritual progression towards Him. He knows that, due to our human weakness, we need such occasions to constantly demonstrate our fidelity. Otherwise, we will not make any progress in spiritual life. And anyone who knows a bit on that matter can’t ignore the old say of the saints, which taught us to never stop our spiritual progress, or acedia might get us.

This well-known story of the Life of Jesus, when he made wind and sea obeying his command is a lesson for several aspects of our spiritual life. Firstly, it requests a complete trust in the ways he wants to lead us through. And Jesus attitude in the boat is giving us the key to success, facing the temptations and trials: Jesus was sleeping. He didn’t pay attention, and continued his rest, as He was living continuously in the presence of the Lord.

This same sleep of Our Saviour is also a lesson of Humility, Mortification and Simplicity. How sweet it is to contemplate Jesus, exhausted in the work for the business of His Father, who felt asleep in a fishing boat. In the accomplishment of His mission, Jesus is showing us how to take ours, day after day, giving time to our nature to accomplish the duty entrusted by God to us, which most of the time required to acknowledge in Humility, that we are unable to completely fulfil without his grace, without a silent recollection, without a rest next to Our Lord.

¹ Mt., VIII, 24

² Dom Pius Parsh, le guide dans l’Année liturgique, 4^{ème} Dimanche après l’Epiphanie

Today Jesus is teaching us to find in the rest next to Him the necessary strength to accomplish His will. On the contrary, we may see the apostles who are afraid of the storm, and try to do more than they can, as they can't control it.

Jesus demonstrated in his inaction the attitude he would like us to have facing temptation: confidence in Him, and when this trust is done, He will act and save us. St Francis de Sales, whom we are celebrating today, as he is the patron saint of our beloved institute, said about temptation:

“Temptation: This is an admonition of the Sage: "My son, if you intend to serve God, prepare your soul for temptation," for it is an infallible truth that no one is exempt from temptation when he has truly resolved to serve God. This being the case, Our Lord Himself chose to be subjected to temptation in order to show us how we ought to resist it.”³

And upon the same confidence we must have into God's will and grace throughout temptations, Blessed Columba Marmion wrote:

“When Our Lord wishes to unite a soul very closely to Him, He makes her pass through many trials. But if this soul remits herself without reserve into His hands, he arranges everything for her greatest good, according to St. Paul's words: “all things work together for good to them that love God”⁴. God's glory demands that we hope in Him in difficult circumstances. To hope in God, to rest upon his bosom when things go well is not a lofty virtue and gives little glory to Him Who wishes to be served by faith and against all human hope. But always to remain convinced that God will never forsake us, in spite of the difficulties which seem to us to be insurmountable, that his Wisdom, his Love and his Power will know how to find a way, that is true virtue, and the more a soul has passed through such trials, the higher she will attain, once she has definitely entered into God's service.”⁵

Let's conclude our contemplation, and confine our souls in God's grace with these holy words from the Middle Age, taken from the Imitation of Christ:

“If Jesus were with thee no enemy could hurt thee. He who findeth Jesus findeth a good treasure, yea, good above all good; and he who loseth Jesus loseth exceeding much, yea, more than the whole world. Most poor is he who liveth without Jesus, and most rich is he who is much with Jesus.”⁶

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

³ St Francis de Sales, Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent, 13th February 1622

⁴ Rm., VIII, 28

⁵ Dom Raymond Thibaut, Union with God: According to the Letters of Direction of Dom Marmion, Letter, 14th March 1902

⁶ Imitation of Christ, Book II, Ch. VIII, §2