

25. October 2020

“True conversion”

1.Thess 1:5-10

Our gospel came to you not only in words, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with great effect. And you observed the sort of life we lived when we were with you, which was for your sake. You took us and the Lord as your model, welcoming the word with the joy of the Holy Spirit in spite of great hardship. And so you became an example to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia since it was from you that the word of the Lord rang out -- and not only throughout Macedonia and Achaia, for your faith in God has spread everywhere. We do not need to tell other people about it: other people tell us how we started the work among you, how you broke with the worship of false gods when you were converted to God and became servants of the living and true God; and how you are now waiting for Jesus, his Son, whom he raised from the dead, to come from heaven. It is he who saves us from the Retribution which is coming.

Paul speaks of an exemplary church in Thessaloniki, whose testimony became known everywhere.

What had happened to it?

The text tells us that they turned away from the idols and turned to the living God, they followed the apostles and the Lord, and in spite of many tribulations, they received the Word in joy given by the Holy Spirit.

We can now deepen some elements of the text:

First: the importance of true conversion.

Perhaps the conversion of a person is one of the greatest miracles, because here man must respond with his free will to the offer of grace. Called and drawn by grace, he abandons his idols, that is, all that has been built up between God and him, and that has taken advantage of his capacity to love in competition to love God.

Idols are not only those figures that people create for themselves and then prostrate themselves before the work of their hands, as we know it from the Old Testament.

One can take the term idol much further. All that we attach too strong to our heart becomes an idol, and it takes the place that belongs to God. Behind the idols are demons (*cf. 1Cor 10:20*), Paul explains to us. Certainly he has those practices in mind when people pay homage or sacrifices to these figures. It is easy to understand that the fallen spirits hide behind them and initiate the imitation of a true cult of God.

What about the other “idols” that take up too much of our time? The demons do not have to be responsible for this. For example, if we have too much love for transitory things, this corresponds to disorderly human tendencies. But the demons will know how to take this into service, take advantage of it and try again and again to distract us from God and promote such disordered love.

Just as the Holy Spirit always wants to remind us of what is essential so that we do not lose the trace of God, so the demon will always try to direct us towards our disordered things in our lives so that we do not find the trace of God.

If a true conversion takes place, then under the influence of the Holy Spirit man will try to leave behind all that separates him from God or hinders him. But his own efforts will not be enough. If he lets himself be led by our “divine friend”, the Holy Spirit will show him what is still missing and help him to overcome it.

The church in Thessaloniki has obviously made this true conversion, it could also bear tribulations for the sake of the Lord.

This is a second point: it is important to realise that the consistent following of Christ can lead to tribulations, disadvantages, persecution, slander and even violent death. The willingness to take this upon oneself for the sake of Jesus is accompanied and supported by the “Spirit of strength”, if necessary even to the point of martyrdom. This is part of a true testimony to the Lord because Jesus himself suffered it.

It would be unrealistic not to include this possibility and we have to make sure day by day that we remain faithful to the Lord in the event of an persecution. This is beyond our natural powers, but it is not our natural powers that we have to rely mainly on, but on the Lord. In the Lord it becomes possible to remain faithful to

Jesus even under persecution. However, we have to seriously work on our conversion, which can be accomplished with a single act, but is not yet completed. If not everything is deceptive, then the “challenge” of our following of Christ is becoming more and more apparent, the shadows of an antichristian power are growing.

The third point is the joy that the Holy Spirit gives in accepting the Word and the corresponding conversion. It is the joy of God Himself that then works in us, for the whole of heaven rejoices in the conversion of a sinner (*cf. Lk 15:7*) and no less when it is equal to a whole community. This joy remains and is a sign of true conversion. It is not primarily an emotional joy as we usually know it, although it can of course also burst out in jubilation at having found our beloved heavenly Father. But it is usually more a spiritual silent joy to bring one's life into harmony with God, to live in unity with Him, it is a joy in God.

When we hear about a church as the apostle describes it, we understand that such a testimony is perceived by other people and becomes an example.

May the Lord grant that out of the present tribulations and confusion the church will emerge purified and strengthened. All idols must be removed and we Christians are called to proclaim the Kingdom of God as truly converted and renewed people. In spite of all tribulations, the joy in God will then be our strength (*cf. Neh 8:10*).