

### 13. Begging for the preference of Christ

I like to quote a very sharp phrase of St. Bernard: “Woe to us if we rejoice in what is not in Christ and for Christ. Woe to us if we offer a poverty than can still be sold! – *Vae nobis si exultaverimus, nisi in Christo et pro Christo! Vae nobis, si vendibilem obtulerimus paupertatem!*” (*De diversis* 21:3).

This is really what St. Bernard is talking about: we make choices, vows, we take on commitments that attest that we hold nothing dearer than Christ, and then, precisely through what we promise, we go off looking for other values and benefits than Christ himself, than Christ alone. Then one justifies obedience by saying that thus at least one does not make wrong choices; or one justifies poverty with philanthropy; or chastity with the freedom to be able to love everyone, instead of having to concentrate on a wife and children, as if someone who is married loves less than the celibate. We pursue our own commitments, reasons, and values, which are ultimately worldly. We have a hard time holding Christ as truly dearer than everything else, and so we do not experience how loving Christ above all other things in reality expands our love of neighbor, our love of the poor, but also our love for our wife or husband for one who is married, for children, for friends, for work, or also for the goods, few or many, that we have. There are billionaires who, loving Christ, know how to transform the use and development of their vast riches into love, and there are poor people so petty that they do not know how to share even a smile.

Concerning this, we should never forget the great lesson that Jesus gave shortly before his Passion, when Mary of Bethany anointed his feet with a pound of precious nard that Judas knew how to value immediately at 300 denarii worth, he who will sell Jesus for 30 denarii. When we calculate what we earn by being with Christ, by following him, we lose the infinite, incalculable value that Christ is for us and for all. Mary of Bethany did not hesitate an instant to waste 300 denarii of pure nard just to anoint Jesus’s feet. As if it meant that even just the feet of Jesus are worth more than all we have, all the perfume that the young Hebrew women it seems would set apart, drop by drop, to sprinkle the nuptial bed on the wedding day. If this is true, it was as if, with this gesture, Mary had chosen Christ as her only spouse, and hence had made a sort of profession of virginity to be totally his, totally consecrated to Christ.

Judas and Mary of Bethany are put in contrast to make us understand that, when Christ is not dearer to us than all else, we betray Him, we betray the one way of being united to Him which is, as St. Benedict would say, not preferring absolutely anything to Christ and his love (cf. RB 72:11; 4:21). We betray Christ when we do not prefer him to everything, for we betray his infinite value, which nothing and no one can have apart from Him.

But as we say this, of course, it is clear that we all always betray this absolute preference, that is, we are never truly capable of it. Only the immaculate heart of the Virgin Mary could truly prefer Jesus to everything. For this reason, we must see in the gesture of Mary of Bethany also a penitential gesture, like the one of the sinful woman who entered into the house of Simon the Pharisee and began to wash the feet of Jesus with her tears and to anoint them with perfumed oil (Lk 7:37–38).

We cannot express our preference for Jesus in another way, without asking forgiveness for all the betrayals that we carry in our heart. We understand that Christ is the only one who deserves an absolute preference, that only He has an incalculable value for us, but then we always fall into our pettiness, into pursuit of our own interests, into our pride's looking for advantage. Perhaps when St. Paul writes, "For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:21), he said it with the awareness and contrition of himself too being part of that "all." The truth of our preference for Christ is the awareness of being fundamentally traitors, the awareness that, after the denial, St. Peter could no longer get off his back.

But this awareness, which always nourishes and renews the humility with which we are called to follow Christ, should not be depressing, sad. It is if we express it out of preoccupation more with ourselves than with loving Christ. If we express it with the desire to love Christ, to prefer him truly, then it becomes an act of begging, a deep prayer of our heart. All that we sacrifice for Jesus, freedom, goods, affective bonds, are more a request than a gift, are more an emptiness that we offer to Christ to be filled than something with which we pretend to fill Christ, to serve Him who already has and can do everything. Mary of Bethany poured all the nard on the feet of Jesus, knowing full well that the nard was wasted, that it could not help Jesus. But the flask of nard that she emptied over Jesus was a symbol of her heart, which was emptying itself out of what is precious for the world to be filled back up by begging for his presence, for his love, for communion with Him. In other words, we should not live out our commitments with Christ and for Christ like a gift that we offer to Him, but as a request, like an opening to the gift of himself that He offers to us. Only Christ is the Gift that the Father gives us in the Holy Spirit.

It is perhaps in this sense that Jesus reacts to Judas's malign comment full of calculation with a mysterious phrase that we should always meditate on: "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me" (Jn 12:7-8).

The nard that Mary poured over the body of Jesus will serve for his burial precisely as a gesture that asks for the gift of Christ, which requests and receives it exactly while He begins shortly thereafter to suffer even to death on a Cross. When Jesus is buried, then he will be totally granted for the salvation of the world. Mary of Bethany, pouring out the nard, receives already the whole gift that Christ makes of himself to save all humanity.