

Word of Life July 2015

Jesus has conquered the world not only in rising again and being with us as the Risen One in our midst, but through his transformation of what is negative, painful, sin when he died on the cross. We too can share in his victory.

'Take courage; I have conquered the world!' (Jn 16:33)

These words conclude Jesus's 'Farewell Discourse' to his disciples at the last supper, on the eve of his being handed over to those who were to put him to death. They had had a tightly-packed conversation. In it Jesus had revealed the inner truth about his relationship with the Father and the mission the Father had entrusted to him.

Jesus is about to leave the earth and return to the Father, while his disciples will remain in the world to carry on his work. They too, like him, will be hated, persecuted, even put to death (see Jn 15:18, 20; 16:2). Theirs will be a difficult mission just as his had been. Jesus is well-aware of the difficulties and the trials his friends will have to face. He had just said: 'In the world you face persecution' (Jn 16:33).

Jesus is speaking to the apostles gathered around him for the last supper, but he is thinking of all the generations of disciples who would follow him throughout the centuries, including us.

It is really true. Even while joy is spread all along the path we follow, there is no lack of 'persecution'. We experience uncertainty about the future, job insecurity, poverty and sickness, suffering as a result of natural disasters and wars, violence at home and among nations. There are in addition the persecutions that come as a result of being Christians: the daily struggle to be faithful to the Gospel, the feeling of impotence before a society that seems indifferent to the message of God, mockery, scorn and sometimes open persecution by those who do not understand or oppose the Church.

Jesus knows about 'persecutions' having experienced them at first hand.

'Take courage; I have conquered the world!'

This statement, which is decisive and confident, looks like a contradiction. How can Jesus say that he has conquered the world when a few minutes later he is going to be imprisoned, whipped, condemned, killed in the cruellest and most shameful manner? More than having conquered, it looks as if he was betrayed, denied, reduced to nothing, and so defeated - utterly.

What is the nature of his victory? It came about, certainly, in the resurrection. Death cannot hold him. His victory is so powerful that he makes us share in it too. He makes himself present among us and he takes us with him to full life, the new creation.

But even before that, his victory was the very act of his greatest love in giving his life for us. He, in defeat, triumphed fully. Penetrating every corner of death, he freed us from all that oppresses us, and he transformed all that is negative in us, our every darkness and pain, into a meeting with him, with God, Love, fullness.

Paul, whenever he thought of Jesus's victory, seemed to go mad with joy. If Jesus, he would affirm, had faced every setback, including even the supreme challenge of his death, and he had won, then we too, with him and in him, can overcome every difficulty, and indeed, thanks to his love, we are 'more than conquerors': 'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life ... nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38-39; see 1 Cor 15:57).

We are invited by Jesus, therefore, to fear nothing anymore:

'Take courage; I have conquered the world!'

These words of Jesus, that we will keep in mind for the whole of this month, can fill us with trust and hope. However tough and hard may be our circumstances, we have the certainty that Jesus has already made them his own and overcome them.

Even if we do not have his inner strength, we have him himself who lives and struggles in us. We can say to him when we feel crushed by difficulties, trials or temptations, 'If you have overcome the world, you will know how to overcome this "persecution" I am going through. To me, to my family, to my colleagues at work what is happening seems like an impossible hurdle. It feels to us as if we can't make it. But with you among us, we will find the courage and the strength to face it, until we come to be "more than conquerors".'

It is not a matter of having a triumphalist vision of Christian life, as if it were easy and everything had been sorted out. Jesus is victorious precisely in the moment that he lives his drama of suffering, injustice, forsakenness and death.

Perhaps we too, at times, like Jesus and the martyrs, will have to wait for Heaven's response before we see a full victory over evil. Often we are scared of speaking about Paradise, almost as if the thought of it were a drug stopping us facing the difficulties with courage, an anaesthetic to lessen the pain, an excuse not to have to fight against injustice. The hope of Heaven and faith in the resurrection are instead a powerful spur to look squarely at every problem, to support others in their trials, to believe that the final word belongs to love that conquers hate, of life that defeats death.

So every time we come across a difficulty of any sort, personal, of people around us, of those we hear about in different parts of the world, let's renew our trust in Jesus, present in us and among us, who has overcome the world, who makes us share in his own victory, who opens up Paradise where he has gone to prepare a place for us. In this way we will find the courage to face every trial. We can overcome everything in he who gives us the strength.

Fabio Ciardi