

Tenth Sunday of Year A/2005

As Christians we have many devotions and practices we perform to nourish our faith and to foster our spirituality, but how do these bring us closer to God and to our sisters and brothers? Moreover, we know that God loves us and he has shown it to us in many ways, how do we react to this God's gift? What is in fact faith in God; is it an external or an internal attitude? The readings of this Sunday invite us to see the heart of God and show us what we have to do in order to worship him in a way that is pleasing to him.

First of all, we know by human experience that when things go wrong, when people are smitten by disease or bad luck, or when confronted by serious problems, most of them become easily religious and pious. But, as soon as the danger is past, they return to their wrongdoings. It is such an attitude that the prophet denounces in the first reading.

In fact, God is not interested in an emotional show of religion that lasts no more than a morning. He rejects all religious practices not accompanied by deeds and which are not rooted in the love for our fellow human beings. Material offerings are important, but have no meaning before him if they are not accompanied with conversion of heart and humble knowledge of his law. In other words, what God is willing is our conversion; and whoever turns sincerely to him, he doesn't reject.

This is what is happening in today's Gospel with the call of Matthew. Jesus doesn't care about his past as tax collector, but rather he looks at the opportunity God gives him to change his life. To better understand the meaning of this Gospel, we have to bear in mind the fact that the people of Israel hated the publicans like Matthew, because they were considered thieves and exploiters. They were not only dishonest and greedy in their job, but they often tried to collect more than what they were supposed to. Even in court their evidence was not accepted, since they were considered liars by profession. Their salvation was considered impossible: how could they ever give back all that they had stolen? But it is this kind of person, and public sinner, that Jesus calls to become one of his disciples. Imagine how stunned the Pharisees must have been!

In fact, by inviting the tax collector, Matthew, to join the group of his disciples, Jesus would like to show the Pharisees, and all those who judge themselves to be holy, that God condemns discrimination; he doesn't exclude anyone from the possibility of entering his Kingdom because of bad reputation or of sin. There is no doubt that the Gospel cannot be offered at a "discount", but rather it must be presented whole and with all its implications. It is also clear that those who don't want to imitate Christ and to keep his commandments should be summoned, but does it compel us to consider them as public sinners or to cut ourselves from them?

The call of Matthew is like that of each Christian. Jesus is not inviting us to learn his message first, but to follow him along the way he is going. He does not want us to admire him, but to follow his example. True religion leads someone to serve the poor, the marginalized and to love and hold as brothers and sisters and as Disciples of Christ, the sinners like Matthew. The mistake of Pharisees is that they imagine a God that is “holy” and wanting to have nothing to do with the sinners. They think they will show their holiness by isolating themselves and by staying away from impure people. But Jesus assures us that God is not like that. He invites the sinners to the banquet in his Kingdom. When will we, modern Pharisees, understand that?

In this context, Jesus’ words become clear: “I did not come to call the righteous but sinners”. In other words, salvation is a call; it is destined to all those who are lost so that they may turn to God. What I am saying here does not mean that sinners should take pleasure in their situation; instead they are called to conversion and this is very important. The answer to the call must be firm and long lasting. Jesus does not accept that someone follows him, but at the same time keeps links with his past life.

Another thing we learn from this Gospel is that no one has the right to consider himself unworthy of God’s Kingdom because of his social or his personal situation. As God’s children, we count a lot for him; he needs our salvation and not our perdition. What he needs is just that we convert and turn back to him. We can always count on his mercy and forgiveness.

To come to such an understanding, we need a strong faith in God’s word like that of Abraham. As a matter of fact, Abraham faith was not a matter of time or circumstances; he has always placed his whole trust and hope in his God. He never despaired even if it seemed absurd to keep on hoping for a son, giving his age and that of his wife. Abraham is great because of his persevering faith in the promise of God. We are called to be like him; whatever the circumstances, we must be convinced that the Father is leading us even though it is along paths that the human mind may consider mysterious and uncertain. Let us learn, beloved in Christ, what God’s mercy means instead of judging people and categorizing them as public sinners.



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