

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY/ A 2005

Our world is surrounded by suffering of all kinds. First of all, there is physical suffering where one experiences illness, sickness and death; there is moral suffering which occurs with privation, remorse and depression, but there is also social suffering which comes up with hunger, joblessness, poverty, and so forth. The question I ask here is this: Is it possible to suffer either physically, mentally, or socially and to keep believing in God?

According to St. Paul - and this is the core of our Christian faith - nothing in this world, may it be obstacles, disappointment, toils, privations or calamities, can separate us from Christ. Why is it so? Because Christ is our inseparable life; he has become a part of our life; whatever be the situation in which we find ourselves, he is always with us; he takes care of us; he knows our misery and is able to help us overcome it.

If this is clear, you understand why in the first reading while the people of Israel were in the dismal period of exile, the prophet Isaiah encouraged them to hope for salvation and liberation from God. This future liberation is portrayed by the prophet as a banquet where there is an abundance of all types of food and drink. No money is needed; the only condition required is a "thirst" for God. Hence the importance of the invitation: "Come to the water!;...Come, receive food and eat...Come to me heedfully..". The consequence of the acceptance is beyond all expectations: the renewal of the covenant and the benefits that only God alone can give. The same invitation is renewed anytime we celebrate the Eucharist when Jesus says: "This is my body", "this my blood", I give it for you. Come and eat. Come and drink so that you may live. Once again, I wonder how far we accept this invitation?

But, the crowd in today's Gospel did not hesitate to follow Jesus. In fact, Matthew presents Jesus as the new-Moses, the prophet expected by the people who enters the desert followed by a great crowd of people. Let us remember that for Israel, life in the desert was necessary to form and train the people. Out there, without any human security, this people had learned to trust only in God. It is for the same reason that Jesus takes his disciples into the desert so that they discover and experience their complete poverty and their dependence on God, and thereby come to understand that they cannot obtain salvation by themselves, but rather they must put their trust in God and in his messenger, Jesus Christ.

What does Jesus do in the desert? Let us examine well all the details. First of all he feels compassion; "*his heart is moved to pity* ...for all the people that follow him". It is not question here of vague "emotion", but rather of a strong feeling which leads to compassion. This deep compassion for the needs of the sisters and the brothers is the very first condition that urges into action. Whoever is not moved, or is insensible, and does not have the same sentiments as Christ, will practically never be moved into action. Such a one will give help with difficulty and only because he or she is forced or ordered to do so from the outside or by law, never in response to an interior need.

What is the second step of Jesus' action? He does not stop his action at spiritual speeches

or promises of prayer, but he also takes a practical attitude by solving the concrete problems of human persons, namely the problem of sickness and hunger. How does he deal with this later?

For the disciples, it would be better to dismiss the crowd so that everyone tries to find himself what to eat. In other words, the bread they have is enough only for themselves, it cannot suffice for everybody. I wonder if this is not the logic of our modern world, the logic of selfishness: *“Each for himself, God for all”*? Indeed, it is, because Jesus begins by telling them that they cannot throw the solution to the problem of hunger on others; they must themselves provide food for the crowd. By saying this, Jesus invites them to get out of the logic of selfishness and to enter the logic of sharing. We can always find some excuse or other to get rid of some brother or sister who bothers us: it is not my problem ... The government has to provide... If we solve this now, we will get a thousand more... etc. But, do we realize how contrary to the Gospel’s spirit is such a kind of speech?

Another striking reality in today’s Gospel is the fact that Jesus does not solve the problem of hunger of the crowd by himself; instead he uses the loaves and fish that people already possess. By doing so, his message becomes quite clear: the community must put in common all that it has in order that the “miracle” may take place and food be available for all. Only when people accept to put in common all they have (their abilities, their skills and time...) will the great problems of mankind stand a chance of being solved. As long as everyone acts on their own, selfishly, taking into account only their interest and welfare, we shall always have in the world situations of immense riches beside situations of utter poverty.

Let me finish now by recalling Jesus’ gesture before nourishing the people: [Taking the loaves and the fish, he said the blessing, broke them and gave them to the disciples...](#) Why are these words, which remind us of the Eucharist, used here? The reason is quite simple: Matthew wants us to see how when we satisfy the hunger of a sister or a brother, when we give her or him material help, we are once again repeating the gesture of Jesus as he takes care of every person. Could we then go to the altar and take the bread of heaven if we are not willing to share our material bread with our sisters and brothers, if we refuse that the person of Jesus be again present through us and in us, if we do not allow him to go on feeding, through us, all people? May the grace of the Eucharist make us sensitive to the needs of our fellow women and men throughout the world! May God bless you all!



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