

TWENTY FIFTH SUNDAY OF YEAR/A 2005

Our God is a God of surprise; his ways of judging and acting are beyond our human imagining and justice; his logic is opposite to ours.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah is addressing his compatriots exiled in Babylon. They are well aware that if they are now in exile, it is because they were unfaithful to God and did not listen to the word of the prophets. What can they now expect? Nothing, they are convinced that God will never forgive their repeated and grave sins they have committed.

The prophet tries to show them they are wrong to think that God is just like them, that he is mean and enraged with them, incapable of forgetting. Such a God is a God fabricated in their own image and likeness. God is not like a human person; God's ways of thinking and acting will continually surprise us. He is able to give us beyond our merits and expectations, because he is infinitely generous. He is able to forgive the sins we have committed because he is a merciful and a forgiving Father.

Therefore, what he expects from his people is only their conversion. In this context, the words of Isaiah sound correct: *Let the scoundrel forsake his ways and the wicked his thoughts*. The conversion that the prophet is asking here is not simply to get rid of the sins and moral corruption, he is asking for much more than that: he wants a radical change on how they imagine God. And this change is important precisely because the thoughts of God are not our thoughts nor are his ways. His ways are above our ways and his thoughts above our thoughts.

These words of Isaiah help us understand the stake of today's Gospel. The parable of this day is all about the way we conceive of God and his plan of salvation. Let me distinguish the historical context from the theological one. From the historical context, the parable refers to the life of the earlier community especially to the entry of gentiles into the church. Will all those coming later receive the same reward as those who embraced the faith of Jesus Christ first? This is a big issue the early church was dealing with. According to Jesus, - and this is the point of the parable - God being a merciful and a forgiving Father, his justice does not make the distinction between earlier and later arrival; on the contrary, he rejoices for the salvation of each of his children whenever he changes his life and embraces faith.

From the theological context, I can say that, in the time of Jesus, the people of Israel had forgotten the God who was good, loving and faithful friend, as preached by the prophets. They have substituted him with the idea of God who is remote, legislative and judge. This God is like a sovereign who, after imposing on his subject numerous precepts to keep, begins to watch and record what they are doing, to reward the good according to their merits and punish the wicked according to their guilt. In this context, God gives nothing for nothing, anyone wanting his blessing has to earn it. But, how can we go without being frightened in the presence of such a God? What work should we present, and which could win us his favor? And yet, somebody feels

safe because he “*works a lot*”, that is, he keeps scrupulously all the precepts of the law and is convinced that every faithful act is recorded as a “merit” in the heavenly books. Time will come when he can demand his due from God.

Jesus rejects this image of God who pays according to human merits. He “burns up all the account books”, he condemns anybody who claims to be in credit with God and who is convinced that merits can be gained with actions. For Jesus, the only attitude one has to take in front of the heavenly Father is the attitude of a child who does not claim any right, cannot merit anything, who is always in joyful expectation of the gifts from the Father.

From this parable, we learn a lot about our relationship with God. First of all, God is not a “*business partner*”. There is nothing we can merit from him; from him we can only receive gifts and be grateful. Why not rejoice, why not be happy if one day even those who went wrong their whole life long receive from God the gift of salvation?

Second. The laborers who came late receive equal pay with those who came early, because the owner did not value their service in terms of work, but in terms of salary they needed for that day. In other words, what counts before God is not the amount of the work we do for him, but the salvation we need. Once somebody converts and accepts Jesus, he deserves God’s salvation in the same way that any other who converted many years ago.

With regard to the understanding of the church, we can say that in the church we should not find people who pretend more because “they came first”. Nobody can feel a “veteran” because he was converted to Christ before others. We all are equal before the Lord. Nobody is the master of the “vineyard”, we all are workers and on the same level; there is no reason that gives superiority of some over others. In the vineyard of the Lord, nobody must work for a great salary; good to the brother must never be done in order to gain a right to a reward in heaven, but because of the love of God. This is what St. Paul has done in his life and ministry, looking first of all to love God and to work for him. This is what we have to do also.

Let me finish by recalling the last verse: “The last will be first, and the first will be last”. This is truly a warning to us; it has to do with our inner disposition at the service of the Lord. The reward and the rank in the next life depend not so much on what we have done, but on the way we have done it. The reward will be given according to the motives and inner dispositions of each individual. Hence, the importance of genuine conversion of heart without which we run the risk of being rejected by the Lord in spite of our coming soon to know him. And for that we pray. God bless you all.



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