

TWENTY SIXTH SUNDAY/A 2005

“It is not my fault...”; “It is all his fault...”; “It is my husband or my wife... who put me in such a situation, etc. We all already have heard this kind of speech in which people try to escape their responsibility by blaming someone else. Passing the buck on others and refusing to be accountable for one’s deeds is exactly what the people of Israel who are in exile in Babylon do. They think that the misfortune which happened to them is due to the sins of their parents and they now bear the consequences. In other words, they would like to say that God is unfair by treating them like that, while it was their parents who sinned against him.

Hence, the answer of God through the mouth of Ezekiel we were hearing in 1st reading. The prophet condemns this kind of thinking; he shows clearly that everyone is to be held responsible for his actions and deeds; nobody will pay for somebody else’s sins. Whoever renounces his sins deserves to live, while the one who perseveres in wrong doing condemns himself before the Lord.

Even if it is also true that our life is sometimes conditioned by the wrong options and choices that were taken in the past (by ourselves or by others), this is not, however, a fatality. We can always break free from this embarrassing heritage. Our freedom and our will to get rid of it count a lot. This is why neither virtue nor vice is completely hereditary. A lot of things depend on us and on how we are willing to change. And God is ever ready to help those who renounce evil and want to reconstruct their lives.

It is in the same way we have to understand today’s parable as inviting us to conversion and the fulfillment of God’s will in our lives. First of all, let me distinguish the historical context of the parable from the theological one. As a matter of fact, historically speaking, the two sons, as the parable makes it clear, represent two portions of Judaism. The first son stands for sinners within Israel (like tax collectors, prostitutes) who despite their initial negative response to God’s call, eventually favorably answered Jesus’ message. The second son represents Jesus’ audience, that is, the religious leaders of Jews, the recipients of God’s Revelation to his people. When they heard God’s message transmitted to their forefathers, they initially gave their assent. But, when God’s plan was brought to its fulfillment, first, in the preaching of John the Baptist and, finally, in that of Jesus Christ, they refused to accept it.

Another fact I would like to point out is that when Matthew wrote this parable (about 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus) the prophecy of Jesus is being fulfilled: the Christian communities are made up of all those pagans and gentiles who had behaved like the second son, had at first said no, but then were the first to enter into the vineyard by accepting the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why the parable refers also to the gentiles’ movement towards the church while the Jews remain aloof.

The explanation given here helps us to understand the stake of this parable. As a matter of fact, we can easily think that we are the second son and thus all we have now to do is to rejoice over our faithfulness and condemn the arrogance and pride of the Jews. But,

this would be a very big mistake; because even today God continues to have two sons.

In the church, in our Christian communities, in the world, there will always be two types of sons: some say “yes” in baptism, but then in reality they change this “yes” into many “no’s. On the other hand, there are many people who never said “yes” explicitly to God, but in their everyday life they love their brothers and sisters, help and suffer for them, perform many charitable deeds. These persons, though not baptized, challenge us, because they act like true sons and daughters of God.

In the Gospel, Jesus points out people who have chosen him despite their shady backgrounds. Many of the dregs of society, thieves and people of low lives, heard the message of the Lord and changed their lives. They became Christians in action as well as in word. They even died for Christ rather than deny him. And the Lord says, “Truly I tell you, tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you”. As you can see it, this parable is all about our way of being Christians.

Jesus’ message we find in this Gospel is a strong encouragement to all those who are hesitating, because of their less honorable past. With Jesus, there is always the chance to come back from the road of perdition. Jesus is always there just over our shoulder, as it were, waiting and indeed longing for us to turn to him. What is required is just a certain degree of humility, an acknowledgment that we are unable to manage our lives by ourselves, and that it is only by recognizing our dependence on God that we will find salvation.

Let me finish by saying that very often the strong Christians, the true Christians are found where you would least expect to find them. Sadly, those who talk a good game, are often the first to compromise their Christianity. I wonder if everyone of us at times does not behave like the first son whereas at other times he acts like the second? It would be better if we became like the third son: the one who says “yes” and then keeps undoubtedly his word to the end. Christ is this son of God who was obedient to the Father until death on the cross. It is he we have to imitate. Let us humbly ask him to fill us with the grace of his Holy Spirit so that we are able to do the will of the Father, by recognizing our sins and by accepting his forgiveness.



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