

## **EIGHT SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 2006/B**

In all the civilizations of the earth, weddings have been always occasions of big celebrations including magnificent processions, delightful music and dancing, delicious food and exquisite wines, etc. How can it be possible for the invited guests of a wedding to fast? Who can logically speaking be fasting in a wedding while everybody is rejoicing?

To better understand the readings of this Sunday, let us, first of all, try to figure out the place of Jesus in God's plan of salvation. The 1<sup>st</sup> reading already states that Israel was like an unfaithful spouse who time and time again betrayed her beloved husband. We know how two betrothed relate to each other during the period of courtship: they care deeply for each other, they seek each other's constant company, tell each other every one of their thoughts, whisper sweet words, and smile at each other. They sing and dance together and look forward to a life of fidelity to each other. But once they are married and the beauty of their relationship wears off, monotony sets in as they go back to being engrossed in their individual agendas rather than what they committed to as married couple... They often find nothing to tell each other; they may pass days without talking to each other; they may become rude to each other, and that is the beginning of the breakdown of their partnership.

This was exactly how Israel behaved with God after the period of courtship in the desert. Once in the Promised Land, the people lost their focus and left Yahweh for other gods. But in his compassion and love, God promised that he would celebrate a new relationship with them and endowed them with gifts. He will give his spouse justice, uprightness, faithful love, and tenderness to do works of mercy and finally a strong attachment to her spouse. It was announced by the prophet that the realization of these promises would happen when God will send the Messiah.

Fasting in this context expressed the sadness of the people that lived in the waiting for the coming of the Messiah. It was a sign of discontent with the present, an invitation to hope in the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees and the disciples of John kept fasting in the conviction that they were still expecting the Messiah, without realizing that with the presence of Jesus, the Messiah was already among them and that the kingdom of God had begun.

To justify the behavior of his disciples, Jesus uses the example of the bridegroom so often used by the prophets. Nobody fasts during a wedding feast. If someone is not eating and drinking, it means that he is still waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. In fact, Jesus presents himself as the bridegroom. With him, the period of the "new courtship" between God and his people, announced by the prophet, has started. His presence is a motif of joy; it is a godsend.

If in spite of all that, when Jesus is talking about his disciples fasting, what does he mean? He is speaking of the sadness of his disciples who, after his death, will be

deprived of his visible presence; this is to be their fasting. Fasting nowadays can still have a positive significance in the sense that what is saved through it can go to help the poor. It can also become a sign that our joy is not yet full, because we are awaiting the Kingdom of God to be manifested in full. This is what we do during the time of lent. However, while fasting, we must banish all sadness because the wedding feast has already started; we must put scent on our heads, brighten our hearts, and wear a smile on our lips.

To walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we have to take his word very seriously, because *“no one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from old, and the tear gets worse”*. In other words, what is required are new attitudes, new way of being and of behaving. When we accept to become Christians we must know that we are choosing something completely and absolutely incompatible with what we were before. It is not a matter of becoming a bit better, of saying more prayers, of adding a few laws to those already existing. The change in the style of life must be radical and complete. It is a matter of accepting Christ or rejecting him. We cannot mix up the old and the new; otherwise we run the risk of losing both. The demand is radical: either accept the new in full, or keep on with the old.

With regard to the vocation of the apostle, as St Paul said in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, he is called to bring Christ to the nations, to make him recognized and accepted as the savior. God himself has qualified the apostle for this work and its guarantee lies in the strength of the Holy Spirit who is the invisible actor sustaining the mission. In this context, there is no reason of contesting the legitimacy of the apostle or his message as though he has usurped this charge. In fact, St Paul teaches us here that our life should be our reply to all the critics and calumnies that may come even from the brothers or sisters of our own community. It may happen that we get the strongest opposition from those who have most benefited from our generosity and apostolic zeal. Let our “deeds” (not empty words) be for them, as for Paul, our “presentation letter”, our credentials!

Let us ask the Lord to help us to recognize the presence of his messenger among us and to live according to his precepts. May the Lord fill us with the grace of his Holy Spirit so that the Lent time that is coming be beneficial to our conversion and that of our brothers and sisters.



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