

Third Sunday of Lent C/2007

Our God is a God of patience, compassion and mercy. His forbearance goes beyond our faults; his forgiveness beyond our sins. His heart is bigger than we can imagine to embrace sinners and just alike. He does not judge us according to our merits; but according to his mercy, he offers us a second chance. As he was in the past, so he is today and will be tomorrow. This is how he has to be remembered through all generations as the God who cares, waits and forgives.

All the readings of this Sunday plunge us into the heart of God where his patience and mercy spring like fresh water to cleanse and purify us in order to share in his generosity and receive his blessings. The first reading reminds us how God intervened through the hands of Moses to save Israel from the bondage of Egypt.

First of all, who is this God who intervenes in favor of Israel? He is not an indifferent and insensitive God. On the contrary, he is a God who notices, cares and is moved to act on what he sees. Because he is interested in the life of Israel, he can intervene in their favor. In fact, it is impossible to ignore people and to pretend at the same time to love them. Love starts with the awareness of noticing, caring and, then, doing something for the beloved ones. When we truly love people, we start paying attention to what is going on in their lives. Otherwise, our relation ship is either superficial or untrue.

That is what we learn from God's intervention to liberate Israel from the suffering in Egypt. When God introduces himself as the "I am who am", he wants to say that he is an ever present God, who will always be there for his people. This caring disposition of God challenges us in our relationships with one another: How much do we pay attention to the misery of people around us? How much are our hearts touched by the tears on the faces of suffering people? Do not we often say, "This is not my business"?

If God intervenes in favor of the oppressed, it means he is also a merciful God who is ready to forgive the sins of his people. This second characteristic of God is highlighted in today's Gospel as Luke reports the episode of people Pilate killed while they were offering a sacrifice, and that of those who perished when the tower fell on them.

To better understand this text, we have to remember that in the Old Testament, misfortune has always been seen as God's punishment following the sin someone has committed. In this perspective, when people came to talk to Jesus about those killed by Pilate, they wanted him to corroborate their thinking and conception of misfortune as a consequence of sin.

For Jesus, that is not true. He excludes any link between sin and bad luck, or the death of individuals. Without saying why misfortune strikes only some people and not others, Jesus displaces the point of the discussion. For Jesus, those who died so were not the worst or the greatest sinners of all the inhabitants of Galilee or Jerusalem. Their death was just by chance; others could have been in their place. In other words, if that did not happen to you personally, it is because God

grants you an extra time to repent. God is patient with you; consequently, you have to convert.

As I tell you these words, I remember, as a young priest, a car accident I had in 1985. Despite that the car turned over several times and was damaged, I and my passenger friend, who is today our auxiliary bishop, came out of the car sound and safe. At that time I was teaching in our junior seminary. One day, as I was walking through the classes, I surprised a group of students talking about the accident by saying that if we were not dead, it was because we were not sinners. Otherwise, it would be over for us. When I went to my room, I meditated on what I heard from the students. I said to myself, "If I was spared, it was not because I was not a sinner, but because God had pity on me. I had no merits to emphasize before my Lord. Maybe if I were dead at that time, I would miss my heaven".

I knew that the students were wrong like any others who link bad luck or death to sin. If you are still alive, if we are still alive, despite the sins we have committed throughout our lives, it is because God loves us, and is patient with us. He gives an extra time to convert. That is the point of the last part of the Gospel. God gives always a second chance. We have to take advantage of the second chances. We have to accept them not as good luck or as mere strokes, but as grace to learn something from them. The question, however, is: "Can you feel gratitude for the grace of second chance? What will you do to ensure a mistake will not be repeated? Can you take advantage of this second chance God gives you in this time of Lent?"

The period of Lent is a time when the Church reminds us of God's patience and the fragility of our human condition. We cannot be aware of our fragility without being humbled and asking forgiveness of God for our sins. Jesus is inviting us with insistence to change our wrong ways that can only lead to death and ruin. We have to transform ourselves and change our ways of being and behaving. If we have not yet decided to convert and modify our thoughts, plans, behaviors, it is high time that we start doing it. Jesus is inviting us to look at this Lenten period as a period of grace.

If we take the Lenten period seriously, we can understand why the history of Israel becomes important to us today. What happened in the time of Israel was in order to give us a warning, says St Paul in the second reading. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall. Let us pray the Lord to help us take the present second chance seriously and convert from our old and bad habits. Let us take the patience of God toward us as a grace to utilize now for our salvation. May God bless you all!

Exodus 3, 1-8, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 10, 1-6, 10-12; Luke 13, 1-9



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