

Fifth Sunday of Lent C/2007

Our God is a forgiving and merciful God who does not lock us up permanently in the mistakes we have done in our past, as bad as it might have been, but who always offers us a new chance of life when we turn to him. That is what the readings of this Sunday bring before us.

In the first reading, Isaiah deals with the theme of God's mercy in the history of Israel. As we all know, God has done great things for Israel. Through Abraham, he chose Israel to be his own particular people among the nations. When they were in slavery in Egypt, he intervened to liberate them; he protected them through the difficult crossing of the desert and gave them a Land.

But alas, as an irony of history, the people of Israel are now again in exile in Babylon. All that they have experienced from the hand of God has become just like a broken dream. They dream with nostalgia of the past they cannot restore any more. It is as though God has abandoned them without hope.

In the midst of this despair, God sent Isaiah to reassure them that he is always with them. He is about to do something new for them. What he is about to do is precisely to set them free and bring them back to their country. Moreover, in order to make their journey present, he will prepare a way in the desert; to quench their thirst, he will provide water springs and they will drink at the same source with animals, as in the days of the beginning of the world.

What the prophet wants to tell the Israelites is that the past belongs to the past; it is not worth being remembered, because God is a God of unprecedented novelty who makes everything new. The wonders he has done in the past, he can do again today. He can do even surprising things for his people. With God a new future is always possible, but it cannot be built by locking oneself in the past, but rather by looking forward. That is why the people have to believe in the future and to forget the past and its attractions.

The same message is the point of the letter to the Philippians. Because of Christ, St. Paul has abandoned everything. His past, as glorious as it might have been, does not interest him any more. What matters to him most is to know Christ and to belong to him. To know Christ means to attach oneself to him, to prefer him to everything and to share in his life. From now on his eyes are fixed on the future rather than on the past. All his efforts aim to become better and better, and to possess Christ as he has been "taken possession of by Christ Jesus".

To break with the past, to put it behind us, and to believe in the possibility of the future is what Jesus proposes to the adulterous woman who was brought to him in today's Gospel. To better understand the gravity of what is happening here, we have to remember that the Law of Moses was very strict about adultery. By no means and regardless of circumstances, adultery equaled death.

In this perspective, when the Pharisees come to Jesus with this woman they want not only to set a trap for him, but also to confuse him, because they surely knew what to do in the present case, and for that they did not need Jesus'

opinion. However, Jesus' reaction overturned them from their pedestal and brought them to face the reality of their own life.

First of all: It is so easy to judge others, to see the bad they do and to accuse them of misconduct, but what about us? Are we perfect? What Jesus does is simply to bring to their awareness the fact that whoever bears easy judgment forgets that human fragility is common to anyone. It is hypocritical and dishonest to look only at the sins of others and to forget yourself. Start cleaning your own house before that of the neighbor. This is why Jesus says, "Let the one who among you is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her".

By doing so, Jesus does not at all make adultery legitimate or justify any sin. He neither says that the woman is innocent nor praises her for what she has done. A sin is a sin and should be condemned. However, Jesus does not lock the sinner in his sinful situation. On the contrary, he gives him or her an opportunity to repent, to trust God's mercy and to change. The will of his Father is precisely that any sinner may repent and change his life for the best. That is the reason why he does not condemn the woman, unlike the Pharisees.

As a matter of fact, psychologists have pointed out that people most ready to condemn others are generally those trying to hide their own guilt. Gossips, criticism, harsh judgment, taking pleasure in spreading scandals are only a way of hiding our own faults. When people do things like that, they try just to distract from their own sins by decrying those of others. Psychology can also demonstrate that we normally only spot faults in others that we, in some way, carry within ourselves.

As Jesus is without sin, he puts himself in a position of understanding the misery of this woman, and he can only but forgive her. Jesus' reaction teaches also that there are two kinds of justice, namely that based on the law and that based on love. Justice of law exists in order to judge, to condemn and to punish; justice of love exists in order to forgive and to save. God our Father loves us too much that he wants us to live and not die. For that he forgives and wants us to change.

The last words of Jesus to the woman, "Go, and from now on do not sin any more" reveals the challenge before which we are any time we are forgiven our sins: How can we build a new future by using the grace of forgiveness God gives us by becoming better and better? God detests sins, but he loves the sinner. That is why he forgives us when we repent and make amends for our sins. Let us use this time of Lent for our betterment and improvement. Let us not miss the opportunity of becoming better by abandoning our bad behaviors. Let us ask the Lord to help renounce sins, repent and receive his forgiveness and our salvation. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 43, 16-21; Philippians 3, 8-14; John 8, 1-11



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