

24th Sunday in Ordinary time C/2007

As parents, grand-parents or educators, you have been certainly confronted with the reality of the mistakes of children where you have been pushed to try to understand and forgive. To make mistakes is part of human life and human growth. The problem becomes difficult only when children are not sorry about the wrong done and keep doing things their own way. However, in spite of the suffering for such a situation, parents still hope that their children can change and become better. It is a similar situation which is described in today's readings.

The first reading describes the first big sin of Israel following their exit from Egypt. Despite the blessings received from God, Israel fell into idolatry, making a calf and worshipping it as god. How did it come that a people so well instructed about God, who have experienced his mighty deeds and powers, forget him so easily?

Such a behavior can be explained only if we understand that Israel wanted to become like any nation and to act like them. In fact, most of us get into trouble when we stop being who we are and what we always have been. When we start comparing our life to that of others, when we forget where we come from, and where we stand in life, the result is that we throw away the principals on which our life is built. At that particular moment, when we start imitating the others, the door to sin is widely open.

However, in spite of disappointment and fury, God forgave his people when Moses pleaded for them. This episode teaches us that, although sins afflict God, they cannot destroy his love for us. His love is so big that when we change and come back to him, he forgives us, no matter what we have done. Here is the only reason of our salvation, and the foundation of our hope for eternal life, namely that the infinite love of God will never be broken, that his love will never be overcome by any infidelity of people, no matter how great.

In fact, there is no self-merit we can praise before God; there is only mercy we can receive when we turn to him with the whole of our heart. St Paul has experienced that mercy of God, as we heard in the second reading. Christ has forgiven him and entrusted him with work to do for his Church. For us, at times we forgive someone who has committed mistakes or is guilty, but we make it clear that we cannot trust him any more. This is the opposite of Christ; he trusted Paul and made him his minister. For that, Paul is so thankful to Jesus for what he has done for him. Christ trusts us despite our sins; he wants us to be his.

That love of God and his mercy toward the sinners are the main content of Jesus' message in today's Gospel. In three consecutive parables, Jesus states that God his Father cares for the sinners. Regardless of the sins they have committed, when they come back to him and convert, he grants them his forgiveness.

First of all, Jesus is criticized for his openness toward the sinners and his warm welcome of them. Those who complain about his attitude think that a clear demarcation should be put between the good and the bad and, for that, the sinners should be avoided at any cost. What is at stake in this complaint is the image of God. Unlike the Pharisees and the Scribes, Jesus reveals to us a God

who loves all unconditionally and indiscriminately, the just and the sinners alike. That is why he makes the sun rise on the good and the bad alike. If God the creator loves all in the same way, why shall we not do the same thing?

That is why in these parables Jesus shows them that they are wrong in categorizing people. That is not what his Father is; he is compassionate, merciful and forgiving. Like a shepherd who has lost just one sheep, goes looking after it and rejoices when he finds it, so does God when a sinner renounces his sinful situation and comes back to him.

Like a woman who has lost her coin, lights a lamp to look for it, and rejoices with the neighbors, because she has found it, so does God act toward us when we abandon our past and want to write a new page of our life with Jesus. Every conversion on earth brings a huge joy in heaven. When, because of God, we renounce our bad behaviors, God, who looks at us from heaven, is happy that we, his sons and daughters, are able to act so for the glory of his name and our eternal salvation.

In the front of such a joy from heaven and the truth that our Father in heaven forgives the repentant, the attitude of the oldest son of the Gospel becomes unjustifiable. Why does he not rejoice because the brother who was lost is back? Why does he not just enter the house to celebrate because his brother who was dead is now back to life? Some of us are like the oldest son, consumed with jealousy for the place the repentant sinners and new converts take in the community. And yet the fact that we never abandoned our faith should push us to rejoice that others come to know Jesus and give him their lives.

We should not, however, forget that conversion requires the courage to break with our mortal past. The youngest son was saved, because he dared go back home and get out of the bad situation in which he was. Counting on his father's compassion and mercy, he experienced his bounty. Without our efforts to get rid of sins, and without trusting God's mercy, we cannot experience the peace in our life that comes from a forgiven heart.

Let me conclude this homily by pointing out that by hearing today's readings, we all feel that we are called to conversion from our sins. But we feel also that we have here a message of hope, consolation and peace. Whatever might be our situation, it is never too late; a second chance is always possible. Hope is Christian; despair is anti-Christian. The question, however, is: How ready are we to hope and change? How ready are we to take the opportunity God gives us to come back to him? May I make a suggestion? Do not let God's grace pass your way without seizing it. Let us open our heart to the grace of forgiveness and let us reconcile with God and with one another. God bless you all.

Exodus 32, 7-14; 1Timothy 1, 12-17; Luke 15, 1-32



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