

25TH Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2008

We live in a culture in which work and money play a big role. Those among us who make a good amount of money in an honest way, we call successful men and women. The harder you work, the more successful you are. In the end it comes to this: the more effort you put in, the more recompense you have.

If this is true for us as human beings and for our enterprises, the same is not, however, true for God. God's kingdom obeys other rules and laws than human. His logic is not our logic; and his ways are not our ways. This is what today's readings try to tell us by showing us that our salvation is not owed us by God as a recompense following our effort. Instead, it is a gift God gives us beyond our hard work and effort.

In the first reading, Isaiah reminds the people of Israel that God's thoughts and ways are not like those of humans. In fact, in that period of time when Israel was in exile, the people thought that God would never forgive them their sins. They thought that he was still angry with them for their sins.

Isaiah reacts to that perception by telling them that they are wrong. What God wants is just that they convert and come back to him. Therefore the scoundrel—and the wicked should renounce their evil ways and turn to God who is generous and forgiving. God's ways and thoughts are not like those of humans.

The idea that God's thoughts are not ours is illustrated in today's Gospel in the parable of the owner and the laborers. In fact, everybody understands the story narrated in this parable about these workers hired at different hours of the day and to whom the owner gives a same salary at the end of the day. Everybody understands also the shock of those of the employees who, after having borne the burden of the whole day, are treated in the same way as those hired in the evening. It is in this shock that is found the point of the Gospel.

The historical context of this parable refers to the history of the early Church. In fact, the disciples were the first to welcome Jesus' message on the kingdom and to follow him. With the evolution of time and his preaching many other people entered the Church and joined the group of the first disciples. This situation has created some jealousy among the disciples. It has raised the question of whether they will receive the same recompense with those who came late to faith.

Jesus' answer to this question is clear and without ambiguity. God does not act according to distributive justice, but according to the need of each one. That need is the salvation each one expects from God. Anytime someone changes his life and believes in God, he is saved. Distributive justice repays to each according to the work provided. Salvation, on the contrary, is a gift that God gives us independent of our works and merits.

Another truth the parable teaches us is about God's kingdom and about how he deals with us. First of all, there is the affirmation of God's generosity. God gives always the gift of faith to each one in his time. God's generosity is symbolized in the text by the different hours the landowner goes out to hire laborers: six o'clock, nine o'clock, twelve, three and five o'clock.

The persistence of going out at different hours shows that God wants us to be saved. It is his will that we might be saved. Salvation is so important that God does not stop going out to look for people. The insistence of the landowner who, in fact, represents God in the parable, to bring people in his vineyard is the foundation of the ministry of evangelization. It gives us also a duty of working for the salvation of our brothers and sisters by bringing them to the Lord.

The consequence to draw from such a consideration is that no one has the right to say that it is too late for him and for his salvation. God gives us always a chance and opportunities to come to him. It depends on each one to take advantage of it and consolidate his relationship with God.

Another thing the parable teaches is that, because God is generous toward his people, anytime that someone comes to God we have to rejoice for the salvation of our brothers and sisters.

This is a very tricky point and a challenge to each one of us. Some people think that since they have been members of the Church for a long time, they have the right of privilege and of deciding concerning any matter of the life of the Church. The truth, however, is that we are all God's servants and equal before him. No matter when we have believed in God, we are all entitled to a same treatment. The different hours we have come to believe do not make any difference at all with regard to our salvation.

The last thing I would like to say is about the nature of salvation. Salvation is a gift and a grace God gives us. It is not a salary God owes us. It would be a misconception to consider salvation as a reward we receive because of our merits before God. Before God everything is grace and not an earning. That is why, in the end, the landowner gave to each of the employees what he deemed just for their survival, even if the first laborers wanted to have more than the others.

The last words we find in the end the parable "the last will be first, and the first will be last" constitute a warning and a challenge to us. We have to take this warning and this challenge seriously. They are a reminder to us that we have to persevere in our commitments as Christians and should not squander the opportunities the Lord gives us in order to change and abide more closely in him.

We find such seriousness in the life of St Paul. St Paul has given us an example of someone who was perseverant in everything he did for the glory of God. Courageously and effectively he seized any opportunity coming his way so that Christ might be glorified in him. Should he die or live, everything he did was for the glory of God. Let us ask the Lord to give us the same grace he gave St Paul so that he might be glorified in everything we do. God bless you all!

Isaiah 55, 6-9; Philippians 1, 20c-24, 27a; Matthew 20, 1-16a



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