

Fifth Sunday of Lent C/2010

There are two types of people in the world, namely the pessimist and the optimist. The traits of both of these people can be found in each one of us. When the pessimists look at the world, they see only what is negative and does not work. They cling to the past and dream only of the good old days as though the future is impossible. Today's readings tell us that we have to look at the world and human condition with the eyes of God, who is capable of transforming the past and building up a better future.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah invites the people of Israel not to be discouraged in their misfortune. He reminds them that God is not only a God who saved them in the past from slavery in Egypt. The wonders he has done in the past, he can renew them again today. He can even do more and he can even do surprising things for his people.

If so, Israel should not base its evaluation of life only on the past, as though that is all that is needed. God is a God of novelty and newness. He is about to do something totally new. Not only will he set his people free, but he will also spoil them. He will make water run in the desert and rivers in the wasteland in order to quench their thirst and to provide a drink for the wild beasts.

What the prophet wants to tell the Israelites is that with God a new future is always possible. But it cannot be built by locking themselves in the past, but rather by looking forward. That is why they have to forget the past and its attractions. They have to trust God and believe that he can transform their lives and give them a new direction.

The future and the new direction is what St Paul is talking about in the second reading. In fact, St. Paul has abandoned everything for the sake of Jesus. He was educated in the strict Jewish discipline of Pharisees. But all that past, as glorious as it was, does not interest him any more. What matters to him most is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share in his sufferings.

All his life long, he has tried through the Jewish tradition to get into a right relationship with God. He has discovered that a right relationship with God is based not on law but on faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, to walk in the way Christ walked, to bear the cross he bore, to share the death he died in order to, finally, receive his everlasting life is preferable to anything else. 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".

What St Paul wants to tell us is that each one of us has been grasped by Christ for some purpose. Therefore, we should all press on throughout our lives so that we may grasp that purpose for which Christ grasped us. We should never glory in any of our achievements or use them as an excuse for relaxation. In that perspective, we should forget all that we have done and remember only what we still have to do. After all, our life is like that of an athlete always pressing onwards to a goal which is always in front.

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. As a matter of fact, adultery was considered in Jewish society as a grave sin and punishable by death. From the legal point of view, the Scribes and the Pharisees were correct to recommend the death of this woman.

However, by bringing this woman to Jesus, their intention was to set a dilemma before him. If Jesus agreed to stone the adulteress, they would accuse him of lack of compassion and love, which was the basis of his teaching. If he ordered the adulteress to be pardoned, they would accuse him of failing to respect the Law of Moses. The only way to get out of that trap was to bring these people to face the reality of their own sinful life and to ponder.

From the outset, it is clear that the Scribes and Pharisees who bring this woman to Jesus are not honest. How easy it is to judge others and their misconduct by forgetting our own faults! By acting the way he did with the Pharisees, Jesus warns us and tells us that whoever passes easy judgment forgets that human fragility is common to anyone. It is hypocritical and dishonest to look only at the sins of others. If there is something we have to do is to start cleaning up our own house before that of the neighbor. This is why he says, "Let the one who among you is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her".

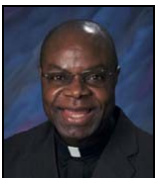
In fact, one of the mistakes many of us do is that we demand from others the standards we never even try to meet ourselves. Many of us condemn faults in others which are obvious in our own lives. As psychologists have pointed out, easy judgment and pleasure in spreading scandals are only a way of hiding our own faults. "If God would keep a record of our sins, who could survive", the Psalm 90 says.

By not condemning the accused woman, is Jesus legitimizing adultery or justifying sin? Not at all; a sin is always what it is and should be condemned. However, Jesus does not lock the woman in her sinful situation. He offers her a second chance and the opportunity to repent. Jesus believes that each person has a past, but also a future. A past, as bad as it might be, can always be changed by God's mercy. What God wants is not the death of a sinner, but his repentance and conversion. That is what Lent is all about.

Another lesson we find in the Gospel is the challenge of forgiveness: "Go, and from now on do not sin any more". Anytime we are forgiven, we are presented with the challenge of becoming better. When we are forgiven, we are challenged to repent and make amends of our sins. Remember always that a saint has a past, but a sinner has a future. That is the goal of Lent, namely to build a future with Jesus.

The last word is about the difference between justice of law and justice of 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. The justice of law aims at condemning; the justice of love aims at curing the wrongdoer. That is why those who are in a position of judge or of authority must be like a physician whose deep desire is to heal and not to prolong the disease. That is what Jesus tries to do when he forgives us. Let us then take advantage of Lent and change our lives. Let ask Jesus for the courage to renounce sins, repent and receive his forgiveness through the sacrament of confession. May God bless you all!

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



Homily Date: March 21, 2010
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20100321homily.pdf