

Fourth Sunday of Easter C/2010

We live in a culture where we are pushed to believe that life can be but a joyful experience. The commercials on television try to convince us that it will be so if we buy what they propose to sell us. The partisans of “Your happiness right now” propose receipts to fix all our problems right now, like with a magic wand.

In spite of all these teachings, we know that life is not always that mild, nor is the experience that soft. Even if we love our work and commit all our time to it in order to succeed, there is no job that does not have unpleasant aspects. Life is demanding and loyalty to our commitments requires sacrifice.

Today’s readings invite us to reflect on those times when life seems to be anything but a joyous experience, when as Christians we have to undergo disappointment, rejection and trials. They also provide us with resources which can help us persevere under the guidance of Jesus, the good shepherd.

The Acts of the Apostles give an account of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas where they had a joyful experience of making many converts, but also that of facing rejection and opposition. The reluctance of the Jews to accept the good news brought by Paul and his companion is characteristic of the hardness of the human heart when confronted with the change of life that God requests. When we do not let our heart open to the word of God, it is hard to change. The price of eternal life comes out of conversion of heart and change.

The rejection of Paul and Barnabas teaches us, also, that life is never a continuous success story. When things do not go our way, we should think of Paul and Barnabas and be steadfast and persevere. However, we should not forget that God guides us in a mysterious way, even through unsuccessful work, to achieve unexpected results. This truth is evidenced by the fact that it was through the Jewish rejection of Jesus that his word spread throughout the gentile lands.

We should remember also that, though persecuted, Paul and Barnabas were always filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. As paradoxical as it might be, this is a sign that joy and tears can go together, as well as with unfulfilled hopes and sorrow for suffering injustice. The reason for that is that such suffering is worthwhile because of the price it contains. Think of the suffering and sacrifice you endure, for instance, for the future of your children or the wellbeing of your family. Despite the difficulty, you accept them with joy because they are worthwhile for the happiness of your beloved ones.

The second reading of the book of Revelation shows us what reward, as Christians, we will have for the sufferings we bear for the sake of God’s Kingdom. A great joy, indeed, lies before us, but we first have to go through suffering, to wash our robes in the blood of the Son of Man, in order to receive it.

The book of Revelation tells us also that, in spite of all our present suffering, everything will be fine. It will be fine for every single creature of those who have trusted Jesus Christ, the Lamb of

God, from all peoples, races, languages and nations. Those people, who, in this world, went through sufferings and persecution, giving their lives for the sake of Jesus and for the welfare of their fellows, will not be disappointed. God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of all those who, in spite of their suffering, remained faithful to him and their fellow humans. They will be rejoicing and glad before him without cease. They will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or any heat strike them.

All that will be possible, because the Lamb who is on the throne will shepherd them and lead them to the springs of life-giving water. Furthermore, what is happening to them now is what happened to Jesus himself. God can never fail to reward his faithful ones. As it was for Jesus, so will it be for his disciples.

All this helps us understand why we have to listen to Jesus, the good Shepherd, and to follow him. By using the image of shepherd when talking about himself, Jesus would like to tell us that with him we are secure, and without him we are lost. Of course, we know the role of a shepherd. The shepherd is the one who walks at the head of his flock to show them the safe way to pasture and to the springs of fresh water. Jesus is that true shepherd who takes care of us and without whom we expose ourselves to countless dangers and misfortunes.

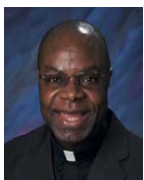
Jesus reassures us in today's Gospel that, if we listen to his voice and follow him, he will give us a life that will never end. He reassures us that he knows each one of us, our needs, our merits and our faults. He loves us as we are, with all our limitations, and he expects us to return his love by keeping his word. He reassures us that nothing would snatch us from his hand.

This does not mean that we cannot go through problems and conflicts, suffering and death. It means only that, even in the darkest moment of our lives, we will never be completely crushed, because Jesus is with us. Therefore, we have to trust him and keep up our courage. Let me say it loudly: "When you are depressed, keep up your courage! Jesus cares. Jesus knows your struggles and your problems!" He is ready to do something for you.

Moreover, Jesus offers us both courage and a challenge. The courage is about the assurance that no one can snatch us out of his Father's hands. The challenge is about becoming like him, that is, good shepherds of people entrusted to us. In fact, every one who is entrusted with the care of others like priests, parents, husbands, teachers, doctors, nurses, etc... is a shepherd. In that sense, we become good shepherds when we give the best of ourselves for the good of those entrusted to us. Otherwise, we are bad shepherds and bad leaders.

Let us, then, ask God to help us listen to Jesus, the good shepherd, and follow him. Let us ask him to make us strong and persevering so that, in spite of hardships of life, we may persevere in our faith. God bless you all.

Acts 13, 14, 43-52, 40b-41; Revelation 7, 14b-19; John 10, 27-30



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