

9th Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

We live in a country of freedom and where people cherish freedom. Any freedom implies a choice of some things and the rejection of others. Because freedom implies a choice, there is a price to pay in the sense that if we make bad choices, we will reap bad consequences. If, on the contrary, we make good choices, we will have good consequences. This is true not only for life in society, but also for our relationship with God.

That is exactly what Moses tells the people of Israel, namely that they are free to choose the blessing or the curse. If they obey the commandments of the Lord and observe his statutes and decrees, God will certainly bless them. If, on the contrary, they reject God's commandments, turn away from his ways and follow other gods, they will incur a curse.

What is behind this text is the idea that our obedience to God brings a blessing upon us, while our disobedience is a source of misfortune. That being the case, it is in our interest to keep the commandments and to put them into practice. However, God will not force our hand to believe in him or to respect his laws. It is up to us to make that choice and to receive God's blessings. That is why Moses insists that the Hebrews take seriously the words of God and put them in their heart and soul; they bind them on their wrist and let them be a pendant on their forehead, so that they might have the blessing.

This vision of Moses is confirmed in today's Gospel as Jesus insists on the importance of putting into practice the word of God and not only of merely listening to it. First of all, Jesus warns us against hypocrisy and the possibility of losing our salvation if we do not do what he recommends us.

In fact, there is a permanent danger of losing our eternal salvation if our commitment to God is something simply external and we recite only from the lips without our whole life being involved and without practice. Such a way of behaving creates a hiatus between our words and actions, our words and our life, because after all, what counts most is not what people say, but what they do. In that sense only our practice is the proof of our faithfulness and sincerity before God.

If we act otherwise, we are just like false prophets who will do and say a lot of things in the name of Jesus, but whose real motive is far from God. There is no doubt that such ones will be rejected by Jesus, because the time will come where the real motivation that drives the actions of many will be seen in clarity before the judgment of God. At that time, there will be nothing to hide anymore and each one will receive the recompense according to his/her acts.

All that helps us understand the strength of the example Jesus gives and the contrast between a house whose foundation is built on the rock and a house that is built on the sand. To be just a listener and not a doer is like building the house on the sand. And that is unwise and dangerous, because the sand is a shakable foundation that a storm can easily destroy. To be a listener and a doer at the same time is like building one's house on a rock. The rock gives to the house a strong foundation.

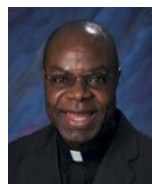
There is here a symbolism we need to grasp in order to understand the gravity of the words of Jesus. Rock and sand are the symbols of where we stand in our journey of faith and the way we react to the words of Jesus. In order to sustain the journey of faith, we need to listen to the word and to put it into practice. Listening and practicing, hearing and doing, have to go together, otherwise something is wrong in our faith. It is impossible to have one without the other and vice versa. If we do not pay attention to both aspects of our faith, we run the risk of being surprised at the end of the race.

Why shall we listen to the words of Jesus? We have to listen, because if we do not do so, we run the risk of taking the bad directives for good, which will jeopardize our eternal salvation. Moreover, to listen to the right words has today become a challenge. In fact, we live in a society that produces so much information that there is the danger of equating and relativizing everything we hear. And yet, we are called to set some priority in our hearing and listening so that we come to sort out what is important for us and what is not. Jesus wants us to give priority to his word. He wants us to listen to it before listening to other things.

Whatever might be our way of listening, however, it is not enough for our salvation to be content with listening alone. We have also to act. Why is it so important? It is important because knowledge becomes relevant only when it is put into action, and theory becomes meaningful only when it is put into experience. Otherwise, it is like consulting a physician for a disease and, then, neglecting to take the medication he has prescribed. In such a case, there is no healing at all.

All that brings us to St Paul who tells us that we are all sinners and justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Even when we are asked to act and produce deeds, we should not forget that the initiative of our salvation comes from God who was the first to love us by sending his son Jesus in the world. If that is the case, we have to listen to Jesus and put into practice what he recommends us. There is no more beautiful time to do so than the period of Lent which we start soon. Let us ask Jesus to help us take advantage of the Lenten season to do what he recommends us for our salvation. May God bless you all!

Deuteronomy 11, 18, 26-28, 32; Romans 3, 21-25, 28; Matthew 7, 21-27



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