

Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

The readings of this Sunday talk about forgiveness and its benefice for our relationship with God and with our fellows.

In the first reading, Sirach warn us against hateful things, like wrath, anger, vengeance, and retaliation, which make life unlivable and relationships difficult. He reminds us that for anyone who dwells in these poisoning feelings, God cannot listen to his prayer, or forgive his sins, or bring him healing when he is in need. He also invites us to think of our last days and the retribution which comes with death as powerful motivation in order to stop sinning.

What is behind this text is the conviction that when we give free vent to retaliatory feelings and instincts, we do not get any justice done. Instead, we make things become worse, because the result of a vendetta is always to give birth to another vendetta and not the contrary. Another idea is the truth that only forgiveness has the power to set someone free. Not that forgiveness erases the wrong done or it heals the wounds someone has received in life, but rather it allows us to resemble God.

Only this vision can allow us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus tells us the parable of the two debtors. The starting point of the parable is this question of Peter to Jesus in order to know how many times it would be allowed to forgive someone who has wronged us.

While Peter was wondering if it would not be good to forgive until someone wrongs us seven times, Jesus' proposal goes beyond Peter's suggestion and recommends, rather, seventy seven times. In order to illustrate his answer and to show why it is important to forgive, Jesus gives the parable of the two debtors in which the one who was forgiven by his master fails to act in the same way toward his colleague.

In fact, the parable is about a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. The first debtor owed him a huge amount of money. Because he was unable to pay him back, the king ordered him to be sold as well as all his family and his property in order to cover the debt. Willing to preserve his dignity and the integrity of his family, the servant implored his master to be patient with him until he pays the whole debt. Seized with pity and compassion at his imploring, the master forgave him the whole debt.

When in turn, that servant met a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money, he failed to show him the same compassion he had enjoyed with his master. Instead, he let him be put in jail so that he may pay all his debt.

Unfortunately, when the news of his cruelty reached the ears of his master, the latter condemned him and punished him for his lack of compassion and mercy. Jesus concludes the parable in saying that his Father in heaven will treat us in the same way if we do not forgive one another with the whole of our heart.

What do we learn from this parable? The main message we learn from this Gospel is about the unlimited character of forgiveness. When Jesus tells Peter to forgive not seven times, but rather seventy seven times, he is inviting us to forgive unlimitedly.

In fact, if we remain in the field of simple mathematics, we realize that seventy seven times equal four hundred ninety. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to keep an open notebook in which we regularly write down the names of the persons and the bad things

they do against us so that we come to the number four hundred ninety. That being said, it appears clearly that the point of Jesus in the parable is not to teach us that there is a number beyond which forgiveness becomes intolerable. His point, rather, is that our forgiveness should be without limit.

Why shall we forgive unlimitedly? First of all, we have to forgive one another, because as human beings, we are all sinners. What makes a difference between us is probably the degree of sinning or the type of sin in which we are involved, but not the reality of sin itself. If that is the case, we have to be open to the possibility of forgiving one another as an explicit recognition of the fact that we are all sinners.

Second, we have to forgive one another, because God himself continually forgives us our own sins. We have to remember that if it were not because of God's mercy, we would not have survived. We are so inclined to sin that we easily forget our commitment and the promises we make to God. Psalm 129 reminds us that if the Lord could keep the record of our sins, nobody would survive. That is why we have to be appreciative of God's mercy and imitate his bounty.

Because of God's mercy toward us, it would be unwise to start calculating the damages done to us by others. That is exactly what the second debtor has done; he forgot that he was forgiven, and therefore, he had in turn to forgive. Instead, he became mean with his colleague. How can God be merciful toward us if we do not show mercy to others? How can God be compassionate toward us if we lack compassion toward others? Remember the prayer of our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

Third, we have to forgive one another, because of the example of Christ himself who forgave his murderers on the cross. In fact, Christ is our model of life in everything. We cannot pretend to belong to Christ and not imitate his example when it is about forgiveness.

Is Christ's forgiveness an unrealizable utopia? Not at all; people have tried to put this message of Jesus into practice and they have succeeded. Think how Nelson Mandela led the process of reconciliation in South Africa after the apartheid. Beyond hurts and rancor, he led the black community to healing through forgiveness and reconciliation. That is why, as difficult as forgiveness might be, if we put it in our heart and our will, it can work. Here, we have to take seriously the word of Jesus when he invites us to come and learn from him (Mt 11, 28-29), because forgiveness is, first of all, a school of life.

When we talk about forgiveness, it does not mean that the faults or hurts done to us do not matter. Rather, it means that, in spite of the harms and the pain we have for what happened, we willingly choose to put everything behind us in order to give chance to peace and the possibility of living together. Let us pray, then, that Christ give us the courage to forgive one another as he forgave our sins on the cross. God bless you all!

Sirach 27: 30-28: 7; Romans 14: 7-9; Matthew 18, 21-35



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