

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2014

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's providence. They show us that God cares for our welfare as well as he cares for the birds and flowers in the field. They invite us to put all our concerns and problems into his hands because he is not indifferent to our needs.

The first reading describes the state of mind of the people of Israel at the time of exile. It shows that because of the suffering they went through, they thought that God had abandoned them. It gives us also God's answer to the complaint of Israel by assuring them that even if it can happen for a mother to forget her children, that is not the case with him.

What is behind this text is the idea that God accompanies continually his people through the meander of their history. Another idea is the affirmation of the faithfulness of God who can never abandon his people whatever might be the circumstances of their life. The last idea the text brings is relative to the truth that the experience of suffering brings people to very often doubt God's care for them and to forget he is always there.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as Jesus speaks of God's providence. First of all, the Gospel opens up with Jesus' invitation to serve one master and not two. The reason he gives is that when one serves two masters at the same time, it is easy to love one and hate the other. Therefore, his disciples cannot serve God and money.

After that, Jesus invites his disciples not to be worried about life, especially in its basic necessities like food, drink or clothes. The reason he gives for that is that life in itself is more than food and the body more than the clothes.

Then, Jesus gives two concrete examples in order to show them how God in his providence takes care of his creatures. The first is related to the birds that do not sow, reap or gather in barns, but have always their food in abundance and in due time. The second is related to the flowers which do not work or spin, but are always colorful, varied, and beautifully well dressed.

If that is the case, Jesus says, therefore, it serves no purpose to worry about food or clothes. Then, he gives the reason why his disciples should not do so. First of all, he says that people cannot change the span of their life because of their worries. Second, he argues that if God can diligently take care of birds and flowers, how much more can he do for human beings who are so important to him.

For that reason, Jesus invites his disciples not to be worried about material things as the pagans do. What is important, then, he adds, is to look first for the kingdom of heaven and his righteousness and everything else will be given to them. Jesus finishes his speech with a statement, namely that tomorrow will take care of itself and each day has enough trouble for itself.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about God's providence over us. In fact, we have been educated in such a way that we have to work hard and to count on ourselves in order to succeed in life. True enough; when we give all our best to what we do, we will certainly succeed and enjoy the fruit of our efforts and endeavors.

There is nothing wrong in doing so and it would even be irresponsible not to do so. In truth, if we do nothing, we cannot expect something good to happen to us. To work hard, to count on ourselves in order to succeed is certainly a sign that we take our responsibility very seriously.

However, one thing is to be responsible and to count on ourselves, and another is to think that all the results of our endeavor come from our personal efforts. Of course, the results of our endeavors come from our efforts, but in so far as God blesses us. As psalm 127 says, if the Lord does not build the house, it is in vain that the workers build; if he does not watch over the city, it is in vain that the watchers stand guard. In that sense, it is God who allows our endeavors and business to prosper. Of course, we work hard and bring in the best of our skills and intelligence, but it is God who keeps us in good shape and health so that we are able to do all that.

That is why when Jesus is inviting us not to be anxious about food or clothing, he wants us to open our eyes and recognize the part God plays in our life. There is no denial of the existence of anxiety, as though he is promising us a care-free life. That would be unrealistic. Normally, anxiety is part of what it means to be human. For instance, if someone is unemployed and does not know how he will pay the rent tomorrow, he will certainly be anxious. In the same way, if a father has nothing for feeding his family, he will certainly be anxious and afraid about tomorrow. Such anxiety is legitimate.

The anxiety about which Jesus is talking against is that which consumes us completely as though there is no way out of our problem, that which destroys our energy and makes us hopeless as though God has abandoned us. I believe that it is against such anxiety we were praying in the old translation of the Mass, when we said "Protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ".

That is why Jesus is inviting us to put our anxiety in the large context of God's kingdom, meaning that we have to put the kingdom of God above anything else, knowing that God will provide for what we need for our body and our life. In that sense, we have to give the best of ourselves and of our skills in what we undertake with the awareness that God will bless us, because that is His will.

In other words, we take actions and work hard, but with the awareness that we depend upon God's will to bless our efforts. It is not a question of crossing the arms as though the manna will come from heaven, but of working with assiduity as though everything depended on us because precisely it depends on God. It is a question of depending upon God and of counting seriously on his providence, even where we have to work hard in order to succeed. That is the grace to ask in this celebration. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 49: 14-15; 1 Corinthians 4: 1-5; Matthew 6: 24-34



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