

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2014

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's generosity. They show us that God's liberality and diligence go beyond human merits. They invite us to understand that our salvation is a gift we receive from God and not what we earn or deserve thanks to our efforts.

The first reading describes the invitation of the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel so that they seek the Lord when it is still time. It highlights in particular his appeal that they abandon their sinful ways and count on God's mercy. The text highlights also the distance between human ways of reasoning and God's ways of thinking.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is endlessly forgiving and merciful. There is also the idea that conversion is imperative for humans as a response to God's mercy. The last idea is relative to the truth that God's ways of being and acting are different from those of humans.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a landowner who is paying his employees. The parable starts with Jesus' talk about a landowner who went out at different hours of the day to hire people for his vineyard. It accounts of the agreement between the landowner and the workers about the wage they would receive at the end of the work-day.

Then, the Gospel reports on the discontentment and protest of the workers who were hired in the first hours of the day, but received the same salary as the late-hired. After that, the Gospel gives the reaction of the landowner who, in turn, protested for not having done something wrong than to respect the agreement passed between them. Finally, the Gospel describes the argumentation given by the landowner that highlights mostly his generosity and his liberality to do with his good what pleases him. The Gospel ends with a warning about the first who could be last and the last who could be first.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today, I want to talk about the generosity of God and his justice. In fact, we live in a society of industrial people and entrepreneurial spirit where a new business is created almost every day and put on the market.

In such a society, people deal with one another according to the amount of work one is capable of producing. Where the spirit is dominated by the need to produce, there people treat each other according to the merits so that one is worthy what he deserves.

Such a spirit is very important in the sense that it emulates people to produce more and, thereby, to contribute to the development of society. However, people can be so obsessed with the spirit of business that they take God for a business partner. In that sense, it is easy to think that if we perform a certain number of spiritual works, we satisfy God's demands so that he rewards us.

This is exactly the point that Gospel is making by denouncing the conception of God the first comers in the vineyard had. They took him for a business partner who had to reward them with more in comparison to the newcomers, because they have been working for so long time for him.

For Jesus, indeed, God is not a business partner from whom we have the claims to vindicate so that he may pay us more than others. In truth, before God, there is nothing

we can claim or vindicate because of our merits; there are only gifts we can receive and for which we have to be grateful.

In that sense, what counts for God is the salvation of each one of his children. It does not matter if someone has started believing in God earlier or late. What is important is that the person, taking advantage of God's mercy and the opportunity of the time God gives him, changes his life and comes close to him. The hiring of people on different hours of the day in the parable expresses that insistence of God that people may come to salvation. That insistence of the landowner in bringing people at different hours to work is one of the foundations of the work of evangelization.

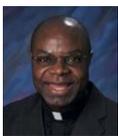
That is why the anger of the first comers to the job is unjustifiable. On the contrary, they should be happy that their fellows, who were far from God, have come to know him and receive their eternal salvation. Moreover, by paying all the workers with a same wage, the landowner treats them equal. He values their service, not in terms of work they had performed for him, but in terms of what they needed in order to be happy, which is their eternal salvation.

In this way, it is clear that God's justice does not make a distinction between the earlier and later comers. On the contrary, God rejoices for the salvation of each of his children whenever he changes his life and embraces faith. Of course, in comparison to the logic of modern world, the landowner is unfair in treating the later comers in the same way with the first employees. But, that human logic does not apply to the reality of God's kingdom. What is behind our modern logic is profit so that each one deserves what is capable of producing. What counts for God's kingdom, however, is salvation. As such, salvation cannot be quantified in terms of production, but in terms of needs so that whenever anyone manifest the need to have it by changing his life, God gives it to him.

That is why it is important that we understand that the Church is not a place of competition and rivalry. Nobody has the right to say that he deserves more because he is the first comer to faith. Nobody is "veteran" because he was converted to Christ before others. We all are equal before God. In the same way, there is no reason that gives superiority of some over others.

I believe that it is for that reason that the Gospel ends up with a warning, namely that the first will be last and the last will be first. This warning opens our eyes to the reality of God's kingdom that does not know privilege so that some are superior to others because of the antecedence of their faith. What is needed for all, later comers and first comers as well, is perseverance. We have all to persevere in our Christian commitments and faith. We should not squander the opportunities God gives us in order to change and abide more closely in him. Anteriority in faith is not a sign of guaranty. The guaranty lies in faithfulness and fidelity. Let us pray that God may help us to be faithful to him until the end. God bless you!

Isaiah 55: 6-9; Philippians 1: 20c-24, 27a; Matthew 20: 1-16a



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