

Third Sunday in O. T. B/2018

The readings of this Sunday talk about the call to repentance. They show that God is full of mercy and forgiveness. They invite us to welcome God's mercy by repenting of our sins.

The first reading recalls the mission of Jonah to the people of Nineveh. It describes the way Jonah fulfilled the mission and the reaction of Ninevites to it. It shows in particular the manner the people of Nineveh reacted in repenting of their sins. The text ends with the reaction of God who spared the city of the threat he planned against them.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is merciful and compassionate. There is also the idea that God does not take pleasure in punishing people, but rather in pardoning them when they repent. The last idea is an invitation to repentance in response to God's compassion and mercy.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus starts his public ministry. First of all, the Gospel describes the teaching of Jesus in Galilee and the focus of his message on the fulfillment of God's time, repentance and belief in God. Then, the Gospel talks about the choice of the first disciples and the spontaneity with which they responded to Jesus' call.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the importance of repentance. In order to understand the importance of this subject, let me start with a simple question: Why did God create human beings? The catechism of Catholic Church, number 358, says that man was created to serve and love God and to offer all creation back to him.

As true as that might be, we should not forget, however, that the love and the service of God have always been threatened by the reality of sins and the disobedience to the will of God. That is the reason why God repeatedly sent the prophets to the people of Israel in order to reestablish the relationship with him and to bring them back in the right path.

The first reading of this day is already an indication of the reality of sin with which the people of Nineveh were confronted. It is also an expression of God's willingness to forgive and win back the sinners through the work of the Prophet Jonah.

That continual trend of sin and call to repentance is what makes the backbone of Jesus' mission and teaching. In other words, the focus of Jesus on the message of repentance is the translation of the situation of fact where the people are caught up in sin and God tries continually to win them back by inviting them to repentance.

In that perspective, when Jesus starts his public ministry with an invitation to repentance, he shows already that "repentance" is a necessary condition for receiving salvation. Why? Because if we do not align our hearts and our life with God's law and demands, we cannot have any relationship with him. That is why Jesus insists on repenting and believing in the Gospel.

Repentance for Jesus, as it is in the biblical language, is more than turning away from sin. It is rather the change of mind that eventually results in a change of life and action. That is why for Jesus, repentance should lead to the acceptance of the Gospel as a way of life that sets the one who believes in the path that leads to God and to the reception of eternal salvation. In that perspective, if there is truly repentance, it should lead to a change of life

and the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah sent by the Father for the salvation of the world.

Repentance is a permanent attitude at the heart of our Christian life. We cannot have access to God and a true relationship with Jesus if we are not repentant. For that reason, we have always to check our lives at the light of Jesus' word and God's commandments and to be ready to repent. Without a life of a permanent repentance, it is easy to become complacent in our faith and presumptuous of God's mercy.

However, it would be a shame to reduce repentance to a simple regret of our sins or a sorrow we feel about the things we did not do right. True repentance, on the contrary, is about the change we need to bring into our life and the transformation of our ways of being, living and thinking in order to follow Jesus.

Without that vision, we cannot be in the same line of thought with Jesus. That is why, it is important to stop confusing the sorrow people feel for the sins they have committed in afflicting the heart of God, and the sorrow people have because of the consequence the sins bring into their life.

This distinction should be made clear to anyone of us so that we come to know where to stand in our faith and what we have to do in order to please our God. If not, the result would be that if, for instance, people could be sure that they would avoid the consequences of their sins, they would certainly continue still do the same thing again.

In other words, they would still continue committing the same sins as long as there is no immediate consequence for it. I wonder if that is not how we function in our relationship with God with regard to the reality of sin.

What Jesus pursues in teaching repentance, in truth, is a real change of life so that it is turned to God forever. It is the same logic that guides the appeal of Jesus to belief in the Gospel. What he wants is that we trust his word; we truly accept that God is as he presents himself to us, that is, a merciful Father who forgives and gives us a new chance of life.

Moreover, when Jesus chose the first disciples, the goal was not different. He wanted that they become his coworkers who teach others to repent and believe in the Gospel. Let us ask the Lord to help us take seriously his appeal and to repent of our sins. May God bless you!

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

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