

Fourth Sunday of Lent B/2018

The readings of this fourth Sunday of Lent talk about the saving power of God in human history. They show that the unfolding of human history is not blind, but directed toward the salvation of God's people. They invite us to trust God's providence by believing in his mastering of history for our good.

The first reading of the book of Chronicles recalls the liberation of the people of Israel from the Babylonian captivity. It shows that, as the people were in exile, they grew in the awareness that it was because of their infidelity to God's Covenant and their stubbornness of heart that they found themselves in such a situation.

It describes the many occasions that God showed his compassion and love to Israel by sending them his prophets in order to warn them, but they ignored them and mistreated them until the day their enemies invaded the country and destroyed the temple. Lastly, the text describes the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery when Cyrus became king of Persia by winning over the Babylonians and ordering the return of the Israelites to their land of origin.

What is behind this text is the idea that sins and infidelity sooner or later bear consequences in the lives of those who are stubborn and do not want to repent. Another idea is the importance of God's mercy and love that go beyond human sins. The last idea is the truth that God, as the master of history, can make everything work for the good of those who love him.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel. First of all, the Gospel describes an important conversation that Jesus had with a leading Pharisee named Nicodemus. It reveals in particular the content of that conversation by reporting an incident that occurred in the desert when the Israelites were saved from the bite of a poisonous serpent in looking at the bronze serpent fabricated by Moses.

Then, it reports on the words of Jesus about the grandeur of God's love for the world through the sending of his son. The Gospel reports also on the motivation that pushed God to send his son in the world by saying that it was not in order to condemn it, but that it might be saved through him. The Gospel ends with the affirmation of Jesus as the light of the world who saves the one who believes in him, while whoever does not believe incurs the condemnation.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about God's saving power and his intervention in human history. In fact, when people talk about human history, they refer to the events, because without them, there is no history. Moreover, when people analyze the events, especially when they are related to the past, they discover in them some patterns of cause and effect that explain the intrigue of history.

That is how they come to say that history is not blind, but rather has a direction because the events composing it lead to a certain outcome whose consequence can be immediate or gradual. Even if the final outcome of history cannot be known, by looking only on the trends of the events, one can envisage how the end will be. Because history is not blind, in religious vision, we say that it is guided by God's plan and providence.

In that sense, where the historians recognize the interplay of protagonists involved in the events and the opposing forces battling for victory, the man of God sees the invisible hand of God leading history to his fulfillment for those who belong to him. As St Paul says, “We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).

That is exactly what happened in the first reading where the victory of Cyrus, the king of Persia, over the Chaldeans is interpreted as God having allowed it in order to give the Israelites the opportunity to go back to their land and rebuild the temple. Because the invisible hand of God is at work in human history, God impacts not only the history of nations, but also the history of individuals. It is God who stirs in the hearts of people to seek and find him. For as St Augustine says, we have been created for God and our hearts will never be in peace as long as we have not found him.

With that in mind, we can understand the story of Nicodemus. In fact, this well respected man in Jewish society was never at peace with himself. That is why he went to see Jesus in the night to ask him personal questions that were torturing him.

In the answer Jesus gives him, we find the principal affirmations of the history of God and humanity. First, we have the place of Jesus in human history. In fact, Jesus suffered and died on the cross in order to save mankind so that everyone believing in him has eternal life.

Second, we have the affirmation related to the love of God. In fact, the sending of Jesus in the world was an act of love and the proof of God’s love for the world. In that sense, God did not send Jesus in order to condemn the world, but in order to save it. Therefore, anyone who believes in Jesus will not perish, but have eternal life. In the same way, anyone who does not believe in him is already condemned.

This affirmation leads to human accountability. In fact, we are responsible for our life and our death. It is up to us to make a good choice in order to be saved. We will never be saved on account of the history of our nations or our family. Each one is responsible before God for the outcome of his life.

In that sense, it is not God who condemns us. We condemn ourselves when we make bad choices that exclude Jesus from the circle of our life; when we do not take God and his word as the guiding principles of our lives.

The last affirmation is linked to the identity of Jesus as the light of the world. In fact, to accept Jesus and his words is to reject darkness and everything that is sin. Positively, it means to accept to live in a transparent way by the light of the word of Jesus.

That is why this Lent, the Lord invites us to purify our hearts and make them worthy of Jesus. Let us ask the grace of opening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we come to do the will of God in our lives. May God bless you all!

2 Chronicles 36: 14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2: 4-10; John 3: 14-21

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