

Sixth Sunday in OT A/2020

All the readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of the Law. They show that God's Law is given to us for our salvation. They invite us to act freely and responsibly with the goal of attaining our eternal salvation.

The first reading talks about the importance of human freedom. It shows how a choice is set before each person between fire and water, good and evil, life and death. It also shows how it is up to each one to choose the commandments and to live or to reject it and to die. Finally, it affirms that God does not push anybody to act unjustly or to sin.

What is behind this text is the idea of the affirmation of human freedom and its consequences. Another idea is the truth that a good use or a misuse of human freedom can lead to happiness or to misfortune. The last idea is relative to the importance of God's Law that exists not in order to limit human freedom but to make human beings responsible for their acts.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus talks about the Law. First of all, the Gospel reports the words of Jesus saying that he has come to fulfill the Law and the prophets and not to abolish them. It also reports the words of Jesus with regard to the everlasting effect and the importance of the Law that cannot be violated without consequences. The Gospel highlights equally the sayings of Jesus with regard to the right intention without which the acts of his disciples will not be different from those of the scribes and the Pharisees.

After that, the Gospel gives various instances where Jesus shows how he has come to fulfill the Law and not to abolish it. First, it recalls the prohibition to kill by extending it to anger and bad words toward a fellow. Second, it evokes the prohibition from adultery by extending it to lust and proposes amputation for the sake of God's Kingdom instead of integrity of the body for hell. Third, it recalls the permission for divorce by equating it to adultery. Finally, it evokes the prohibition from false oath by prohibiting swearing.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the internal aspect of the Law. What do I mean by that? Let me explain. Suppose that someone goes to court with a case for which he is looking for justice to be done.

I believe that once he is there, the first thing the judges will ask him will be if he has sufficient proof to sustain his case. When we talk about proof, it is about facts, evidence or material data that the judges can visit and analyze in order to establish the truth. In other words, no judgment can be based on a simple intentionality, but rather on facts and evidence. That is how our human justice and Law work.

For Jesus, on the contrary, though the facts are important, they remain, however, external. They do not do justice to the hidden dimension of the human person, which is his internal motivation. Why? Because even if it cannot be proven, on the basis of facts, that a person has committed a crime, it does not exclude that he might have willed it in his heart.

That is why he makes a distinction between the external face of the person that human justice deals with by referring to the facts and the internal face that is hidden in the heart. His insistence on "You have heard that it was said", "But I say to you" refers to that distinction between the external and the internal aspect of the Law.

But, there is a question: Why is Jesus so keen to distinguish two sides in the human person, namely the internal and external? In fact, Jesus aims at helping us pursue the purity of heart so that what we do externally, which people see, might correspond to the veracity of our heart, which only God alone can see. In this way, we can avoid the dichotomy that leads to hypocrisy because it is easy to pretend that nothing bad was done on the basis of external facts while consciously, in the heart, a person knows well that his intention was not all pure and sane.

Moreover, it can happen that someone has really committed a crime. But, if he has a very good Attorney, he can be acquitted on the basis of insufficient proof or evidence. So, legally speaking, he is not guilty because of the absence of sufficient proof, but in his conscience, he might be convinced that he did it. The case of O. J. Simpson, for instance, can instruct us enough.

That is why, for Jesus we cannot be content only with the material data, we have to look also on the internal motivation. In that perspective, it is not only the person who has committed murder who is guilty, but also anyone who is angry with his fellow is liable to judgment. In the same way, it is not only the person who has committed adultery who is guilty, but anyone who entertains unclean thoughts in his heart about a woman or a man.

In other words, Jesus brings a shift in the interpretation of the Law, from external facts to internal motivation or intentionality. This shift is not destined to set a trap for human beings so that anyone can be condemned at the simple assumption that he had bad intentions. It is not even aiming at weakening the legal system so that justice becomes arbitrary because based on intention.

No; the problem that Jesus is dealing with is truthfulness, righteousness and honesty. In fact, Jesus wants that those who believe in him strive to keep themselves pure and holy, as their Father in heaven is pure and holy, that is, without guile and without duplicity. Jesus wants also that we be aware that we really need God, because left alone we will be erring and sinning.

We have to think seriously about all that, because even if it is true someone has never killed a person, he cannot say that he never wished to harm someone. In the same way, even if it is true that a person never committed adultery, he cannot say that he never had any thought in that sense about someone. In other words, it is impossible to claim our innocence before God on the simple basis of our respect of the Law.

As Human experience has taught us, indeed, even those living a good external life of perfection still have internal conflicts with regard to evil. That is why Jesus insists on the purity of eyes and hands. If we understand all that, there is only one thing we need to do, namely to ask forgiveness for our sins in the sacrament of confession, to reconcile with God and with our fellows. That is the grace we have to ask in this Eucharist. May God bless you all!

Sirach 15: 15-20; 1 Corinthians 2: 6-10; Matthew 5: 17-37



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