

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2020

The readings of this Sunday talk about the acceptance of responsibility and the necessity of matching words with deeds. They remind us that it is not by projecting our faults on others that we are forgiven by God, but rather by assuming the full responsibility of our acts and by repenting of our sins.

The first reading describes the critiques of the people of Israel toward God whom they reproached of treating them unfairly. It brings forth God's response to that critique by showing that anyone who abandons the virtuous ways of life and compromises his spiritual integrity has no one else to blame than himself. It also shows that anyone who abandons his sinful ways will receive the forgiveness of his sins.

What is behind this text is the idea that human freedom implies that we assume full responsibility of our acts. There is also the idea that the mechanism of scapegoat and easy excuses does not contribute to our spiritual growth. The last idea is related to the truth that the conversion of heart is a pre-condition for the normalization of our relationships with God.

This text allows us to understand the importance of today's Gospel as Jesus talks to the chief priests and the elders about the parable of the two sons. First of all, Jesus cites the case of the two sons to whom their father asked a favor. It relates how they reacted to that request. It shows in particular that the first son primarily said "no" to his father's request and, then, fulfilled it later. It also describes the attitude of the second son, who primarily, said "yes" to his father's request and, then, did not fulfill it.

After that, the Gospel gives a warning of Jesus by saying that if the chief priests and elders do not match their words with deeds, tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before them. The Gospel ends up by giving the reason why prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the kingdom of heaven before them by alleging that they changed their lives by listening to John, while the others did not at all.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today I want to talk about the integrity and the necessity of matching words and actions before God. First of all, let me remind us what a parable is: a way of speaking that uses images and symbols in order to communicate a truth about the kingdom of God.

In that sense, the second son represents in the parable the Jews who said primarily "yes" to God, but failed to live up their commitment toward him. The first son represents the sinners and the pagans, who, though, primarily said "no" to God, but, then, changed their mind later, following the teaching of John and Jesus.

In such a perspective, the message Jesus wants to convey is that the failure to live up to the full promise made to God can cost us eternal salvation, while the conversion of heart is a guaranty for the reception of eternal life.

This evocation of the Jews, who failed to respond adequately to God, and the sinners, who changed their life, raises the question of integrity and the necessity of matching words and deeds. That is why it is also good that I say something about integrity.

Integrity is a quality of being that makes someone whole, honest and undivided in his words and actions. When he speaks, he means what he says, and he says what he means. In order to live in integrity, there are three instances of judgment that can help someone shape his actions, namely society, meaning the fellow men, one's conscience and God.

If the individual take seriously those instances, he will be compelled to be accountable before them. If he does not, a gap will appear between his words and actions, because he will not care. That is why people say often that talk is cheap and acts speak loudly or what count most are not words, but deeds.

The story of the two sons reflects the dichotomy between words and deeds, appearance and honesty, show and sincerity. It is all about moral compass that does not waver according to the circumstances of life.

The second son keeps the appearance; he wants to appear as a good son by saying to his father that he will honor him in going to work for him, but in truth, he has excuses, because his heart is not there. He has very serious business to take care of than the help to give to his father in need. After having offered him a good face, he does not go.

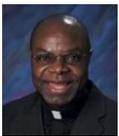
On the contrary, the other son, in an act of rebellion, has refused to obey his father. But, he has a good heart and feels remorse for having been a bad boy. In a move of second thought, he makes amend and goes to help the father. His late change of mind makes him honor the request of his father.

By giving this parable, Jesus wants to tell us that true religion is not that of the show and complacency, but that which tries to do the will of God. Any promise, as beautiful as it might be, can never replace our acts. Our fine words will never replace our deeds. The son who said that he would go help his father was certainly courteous. But, any courtesy that does not get beyond words is in some way hypocrisy. Jesus teaches us that being Christian is, first of all, being able to be obedient to God's word and act on it and not simply a matter of promise.

That is why the Gospel ends up with a warning, namely that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before us. What Jesus means with this warning is that we have to be fully obedient to God and practice what we say lest that after having run for so long, we come to fail the goal of our life, which is our eternal salvation. We have to get out of complacency and strive to put the words of God we hear into practice so that there is no gap between our words and our actions. Hypocrisy ruins our chance of eternal life.

We know by experience that it is not always easy to put into practice the word of God we hear. It is easy to say "yes" with our lips while in our heart we say "no". Let us, then, ask God the courage to change and repent of our sins so that there is no gap between what we say and do. May God bless you all!

Ezekiel 18: 25-28; Philippians 2: 1-11; Matthew 21: 28-32



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