



Lectio Divina

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LECTIO DIVINA

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Sunday, August 1, 2021

*18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jesus is the Bread of Life.*

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace.

We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading – John 6: 24-35

A key to the reading:

The discourse of the Bread of Life is not a text to be discussed and dissected, but rather it should be meditated and pondered. Therefore, even if it is not fully understood, we should not be concerned. This text of the Bread of Life demands a whole life to meditate on it and deepen it. People have to read such a text, meditate on it, pray over it, think about it, read it again, repeat it, and ponder it, as one does with a candy in the mouth. We repeatedly turn it in the mouth until it is finished. The one who reads the fourth Gospel superficially may have the impression that John always repeats the same thing. Reading it more attentively, one becomes aware that it is not a question of repetition. The author of the fourth Gospel has his own way of repeating the same theme, but always at a higher and more profound level. It seems to be like a winding staircase. By turning, one reaches the same place, but always at a higher or a more profound level.

A Division of Chapter Six:

It is good to keep in mind the division of the chapter to understand better its significance:

- John 6: 1-15: the great multiplication of the loaves;
- John 6: 16-21: the crossing of the lake and Jesus who walks on the water;
- John 6: 22-71: the dialogue of Jesus with the people, with the Jews, and with the disciples.

- 1st dialogue: 6: 22-27 with the people: the people seek Jesus and find him in Capernaum;
- 2nd dialogue: 6: 28-34 with the people: faith as the work of God and the manna of the desert;
- 3rd dialogue: 6: 35-40 with the people: the true bread is to do God's will;
- 4th dialogue: 6: 41-51 with the Jews: the complaining of the Jews;
- 5th dialogue: 6: 52-58 with the Jews: Jesus and the Jews;
- 6th dialogue: 6: 59-66 with the disciples: reaction of the disciples;
- 7th dialogue: 6: 67-71 with the disciples: confession of Peter.

The Text: John 6: 24-35

When the people saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into those boats and crossed to Capernaum to look for Jesus. When they found him on the other side, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'

Jesus answered: In all truth I tell you, you are looking for me not because you have seen the signs but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat. Do not work for food that goes bad, but work for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of man will give you, for on him the Father, God himself, has set his seal.

Then they said to him, 'What must we do if we are to carry out God's work?' Jesus gave them this answer, 'This is carrying out God's work: you must believe in the one he has sent.'

So they said, 'What sign will you yourself do, the sight of which will make us believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as Scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'

Jesus answered them: In all truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is the bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

'Sir,' they said, 'give us that bread always.' Jesus answered them: I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- The people were hungry, so they eat the bread and then they look for more bread. They seek the miracle and do not seek the sign of God who was hidden in that. What do I seek more in my life: the miracle or the sign?
- Hungry for bread, hungry for God. Which of these two is most important for me?
- Jesus says: "I am the bread of life." He takes away hunger and thirst. Which of these experiences do I have in my life?
- Keep silence within you for a moment and ask yourself: "To believe in Jesus: What does this mean for me concretely in my daily life?"

Deeper into the Theme

Context:

In today's Gospel we begin the Discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn 6: 22-71). After the multiplication of the loaves, the people follow Jesus. They had seen the miracle; they had eaten and were satiated and wanted more! They were not concerned about looking for the sign or the call of God that was contained in all of this. When the people found Jesus in the Synagogue of Capernaum, he had a long conversation with them, called the Discourse of the Bread of Life. It is not really a discourse, but a series of seven brief dialogues which explain the meaning of the multiplication of the bread, symbol of the new Exodus and of the Eucharistic Supper.

The conversation of Jesus with the people, with the Jews, and with the disciples is a beautiful dialogue, but a demanding one. Jesus tries to open the eyes of the people in a way that they will learn to read the events and discover in themselves the turning point that life should take. It is not enough to follow miraculous signs which multiply the bread for the body. Man does not live by bread alone. The struggle for life without mysticism does not reach the roots. The people, while speaking with Jesus, always remain more annoyed or upset by his words. But Jesus does not give in. Nor does he change the exigencies. The discourse seems to be a funnel. As the conversation progresses, less people remain with Jesus. At the end only the twelve remain but Jesus cannot trust those twelve either! Today the same thing occurs. When the Gospel begins to demand commitment, many people withdraw and go away.

Commentary on the Text

- John 6: 24-27: People look for Jesus because they want more bread. They follow Jesus. They see that he did not go into the boat with the disciples, and, because of this, they do not understand what he had done to reach Capernaum. They did not even understand the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. People see what has happened, but they cannot understand all this as a sign of something more

profound. They stop on the surface, being satisfied with the food. They look for bread and life, but only for the sake of their body. According to the people, Jesus does what Moses had done in the past: to feed all the people in the desert. According to Jesus, they wanted the past to be repeated. But Jesus asks the people to take an additional step and advance. Besides working for the bread that perishes, they should work for the imperishable food. This new food will be given by the Son of Man, indicated by God himself. He brings life which lasts forever. He opens for us a new horizon on the sense of life and on God.

- John 6: 28-29: "Which is God's work?" The people ask: what should we do to carry out this work of God? Jesus answers that the great work of God asks us to "believe in the one sent by God." That is, to believe in Jesus!
- John 6: 30-33: "What sign will you yourself do, the sign which will make us believe in you?" People had asked: What should we do to carry out the work of God? Jesus responds: "The work of God is to believe in the one who has sent," that is to believe in Jesus. Therefore people formulate the new question: "Which sign do you do so that we can see and can believe? Which work do you do?" This means that they did not understand the multiplication of the loaves as a sign from God to legitimize Jesus before the people, as the one sent by God! They continue to argue: In the past, our fathers ate the manna which Moses gave them! They called it "bread from Heaven" (Wisdom 16: 20), that is, "bread of God," Moses continues to be the great leader to believe in. If Jesus wants the people to believe in him, he should work a greater sign than Moses. "What work do you do?"

Jesus responds that the bread given by Moses was not the true bread from heaven. Coming from on high, yes, but it was not the bread of God, because it did not guarantee life to anyone. All of them died in the desert (Jn 6: 49). The true bread of heaven, the bread of God, is the one which conquers death and gives life! It is the one which descends from Heaven and gives life to the world. It is Jesus himself! Jesus tries to help the people to liberate themselves from the way of thinking of the past. For him, fidelity to the past does not mean to close oneself in the ancient things and not accept renewal. Fidelity to the past means to accept the novelty which comes as the fruit of the seed which was planted in the past.

- John 6: 34-35: "Lord, gives us always of that bread!" Jesus answers clearly: "I am the bread of life!" To eat the bread of heaven is the same as to believe in Jesus and accept to follow the road that he teaches us. That is: "My food is to do the will of the one who has sent me and to complete his work!" (Jn 4: 34). This is the true food which nourishes the person, which transforms life and gives new life.

Prayer of Psalm 111

Alleluia! I give thanks to Yahweh with all my heart,
in the meeting-place of honest people, in the assembly. Great are the deeds of Yahweh,
to be pondered by all who delight in them. Full of splendor and majesty his work, his

saving justice stands firm forever.

He gives us a memorial of his great deeds; Yahweh is mercy and tenderness.

He gives food to those who fear him, he keeps his covenant ever in mind.

His works show his people his power

in giving them the birthright of the nations. The works of his hands are fidelity and justice, all his precepts are trustworthy,

established for ever and ever, accomplished in fidelity and honesty. Deliverance he sends to his people, his covenant he imposes forever, holy and awesome his name.

The root of wisdom is fear of Yahweh; those who attain it are wise.

His praise will continue forever.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, August 2, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of everlasting goodness, our origin and guide,

be close to us

and hear the prayers of all who praise you. Forgive our sins and restore us to life.

Keep us safe in your love.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 14: 13-21

When Jesus received this news of John beheading, he withdrew by boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. But the crowds heard of this and, leaving the towns, went after him on foot. So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them and healed their sick.

When evening came, the disciples went to him and said, 'This is a lonely place, and time has slipped by; so send the people away, and they can go to the villages to buy

themselves some food.' Jesus replied, 'There is no need for them to go: give them something to eat yourselves.' But they answered, 'All we have with us is five loaves and two fish.' So he said, 'Bring them here to me.'

He gave orders that the people were to sit down on the grass; then he took the five loaves and the two fish, raised his eyes to heaven and said the blessing. And breaking the loaves he handed them to his disciples, who gave them to the crowds.

They all ate as much as they wanted, and they collected the scraps left over twelve baskets full. Now about five thousand men had eaten, to say nothing of women and children.

Reflection

Context. - Chapter 14 of Matthew, which contains the account of the so-called multiplication of the loaves, proposes an itinerary that guides the reader in a progressive discovery of faith in Jesus: from the lack of faith on the part of his fellow countrymen to the acknowledgment of the Son of God, passing through the gift of bread. The fellow citizens of Jesus marveled at his wisdom but do not understand that this is what acts behind his works. Besides, having a direct knowledge of Jesus' family, his mother, brothers, and sisters, they only succeed in seeing in him his human condition alone: he is the son of the carpenter. Not being understood in his own hometown, from now on, Jesus will live in the midst of his people, to whom he will give all his attention and his solidarity, healing and feeding the crowds.

- The dynamic of the account. Matthew has carefully narrated the episode of the multiplication of the loaves. The episode is enclosed between two expressions of transition in which he tells us that Jesus withdrew, "separated himself," from the crowds, the disciples, and the boat (vv. 13-14; vv. 22-23). Verse 13 does not only serve as transition but offers us the reason why Jesus went to a desert place. Such a literary device serves to create the environment in which the miracle takes place. The evangelist concentrates the account on the crowd and on the attitude of Jesus regarding the crowd.
- Jesus was moved deeply to pity. Now when Jesus arrives, he finds himself before a crowd awaiting him; in seeing the crowd he took pity on them and healed their sick. This is a "tired and depressed crowd for they were like sheep without a shepherd" (9, 36; 20, 34). The verb that expresses the compassion of Jesus is very significant: "Jesus' heart was broken." This corresponds to the Hebrew verb that expresses the maternal visceral love. This is the same sentiment experienced by Jesus before the tomb of Lazarus (Jn 11: 38). Compassion is the subjective aspect of the experience of Jesus that becomes effective with the gift of the bread.
- The gift of the bread. The account of the multiplication of the loaves opens with the expression, "when evening came" (v.15). Those same words will introduce the account of the Last Supper (Mt 26: 20) and the burial of Jesus (Mt 27, 57). In the evening, then, Jesus invites the Apostles to feed the crowd. In the middle of the desert, far away from the villages and from the cities, Jesus and the disciples find

themselves before a significant human problem; to feed that the big crowd that follows Jesus. But they cannot take care of this task to provide for the material needs of the crowd without the power of Jesus. Their immediate response is to send the crowd back home. In the face of human limitations, Jesus intervenes and works the miracle, satisfying the hunger of all the people who follow him. To feed the crowd is the response of Jesus. His response comes from his heart, which breaks in the face of a very concrete human need. The gift of the bread is not only sufficient to satisfy the crowd but it is so superabundant that it becomes necessary to gather what was left over. In v. 19b we can see that Matthew gave a Eucharistic significance to the episode of the multiplication of the loaves: “he raised his eyes to heaven and said the blessing and breaking the loaves he handed them to his disciples;” the role of the disciples is to be mediators between Jesus and the crowd becomes evident: “and the disciples distributed to the crowd” (v.19c). The gestures that accompany the miracle are identical to those that Jesus will fulfill later the “night when he was betrayed”: he raised his eyes, blessed the bread, and broke it. From here comes the symbolical value of the miracle: it can be considered an anticipation of the Eucharist. Besides, on the part of Jesus, feeding the crowds is “a sign” that he is the Messiah and that he prepares a banquet of joy for the whole humanity. The disciples learn from Jesus, who distributes the bread to them, the value of sharing. A symbolical gesture that contains a real fact that goes beyond the episode itself and is projected on the future: in our daily Eucharistic celebration, where we relive that gesture of the broken bread, it is necessary that it be multiplied throughout the whole day.

Personal Questions

- Do you try to fulfill gestures of solidarity toward those who are close to you or who share the journey of life with you? In the face of very concrete problems of your friends or relatives, do you know how to offer your help and your availability so as to collaborate to find a solution?
- Before breaking the bread, Jesus raised his eyes to heaven: do you know how to thank the Lord for the daily gift of bread? Do you know how to share your goods with others, especially with the poorest?

Concluding Prayer

Keep me far from the way of deceit, grant me the grace of your Law.

Do not deprive me of that faithful word,

since my hope lies in your judgements. (Ps 119: 29.43)

Tuesday, August 3, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of everlasting goodness, our origin and guide,
be close to us and hear the prayers of all who praise you. Forgive our sins and restore us to life.

Keep us safe in your love.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 14: 22-36

At once Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he sent the crowds away. After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, while the boat, by now some furlongs from land, was hard pressed by rough waves, for there was a headwind. In the fourth watch of the night, he came towards them, walking on the sea, and when the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. 'It is a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear.

But at once Jesus called out to them, saying, 'Courage! It's me! Don't be afraid.'

It was Peter who answered. 'Lord,' he said, 'if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.' Jesus said, 'Come.' Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, but then noticing the wind, he took fright and began to sink. 'Lord,' he cried, 'save me!'

Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. 'You have so little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said, 'Truly, you are the Son of God.'

Having made the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret. When the local people recognized him, they spread the news through the whole neighborhood and took all that were sick to him, begging him just to let them touch the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched it were saved.

Reflection

The Gospel today describes the difficult and tiresome crossing of the sea of Galilee in a fragile boat, pushed by a head wind. Between the discourse of the Parables (Mt 13) and of the Community (Mt 18), there is once again, the narrative part (Mt 14 to 17). The discourse of the parables calls our attention again on the presence of the Kingdom.

Now, the narrative part shows the reactions in favor and against Jesus provoked by that presence. In Nazareth, he was not accepted (Mt 13: 53-58) and King Herod thought that Jesus was the reincarnation of John the Baptist, whom he had murdered (Mt 14: 1-12). The poor people, though, recognized in Jesus the one who had been sent by God and they followed him to the desert, where the so-called multiplication of the loaves took place (Mt 14: 13-21). After the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus takes leave of the crowd and orders the disciples to cross the lake, as it is described in today's Gospel (Mt 14: 22-36).

- Matthew 14: 22-24: To begin the crossing asked by Jesus. Jesus obliges the disciples to go into the boat and to go toward the other side of the sea, to the land of the pagans. He goes up to the mountain to pray. The boat symbolizes the community. It has the mission to direct itself toward the pagans and to announce the Good News of the Kingdom among them. This was the new way of living in community. But the crossing was very tiring and long. The boat is tossed about by the rough water as the wind is strong. Despite having rowed the whole night, there is still a great distance left before reaching the land. Much was still lacking in the community to be able to cross the lake and go toward the pagans. Jesus did not go with his disciples. They had to learn to face together the difficulties, united and strengthened by faith in Jesus who had sent them. The contrast is very great: Jesus is in peace together with God, praying on the top of the mountain, and the disciples are almost lost in the rough seas below.

The crossing to the other side of the lake symbolizes also the difficult crossing of the community at the end of the first century. They should get out of the closed world of the ancient observance of the law toward the new way of observing the Law of love, taught by Jesus; they should abandon the knowledge of belonging to the Chosen People, privileged by God among all other peoples, for the certainty that in Christ all peoples would be united into one people before God; they should get out from isolation and intolerance and move towards the open world of acceptance and of gratitude. Today also, we are going through a difficult crossing toward a new time and a new way of being Church. A difficult crossing, but which is necessary. There are moments in life in which we are attacked by fear. Good will is not lacking, but this is not sufficient. We are like a boat faced with the wind blowing in the opposite direction.

- Matthew 14, 25-27: Toward the end of the night, between three and six o'clock in the morning, Jesus goes to meet the disciples. Walking on the water, he gets close to them, but they did not recognize him. They cry out in fear, thinking that it was a ghost. Jesus calms them down saying: "Courage! It is me! Do not be afraid!" The expression "It is me!" is the same one which God used to overcome the fear of Moses when he sent him to liberate the people from Egypt (Ex 3: 14). For the communities, of today as well as for those of yesterday, it was and it is very important to be always open to new things: "Courage. It is me!. Do not be afraid!"
- Matthew 14: 28-31: Enthusiasm and weakness of Peter. Knowing that it is Jesus, Peter asks that he also can walk on the water. He wants to experience the power which

dominates the fury of the sea. This is a power which in the Bible belongs only to God (Gen 1: 6; Ps 104: 6-9). Jesus allows him to participate in this power. But Peter is afraid. He thinks that he will sink and he cries out: "Lord, save me!" Jesus assures him and takes hold of him and reproaches him: "You have so little faith! Why did you doubt?" Peter has more strength than he imagined but is afraid before the turbulent waves and does not believe in the power of God which dwells within him. The communities do not believe in the force of the Spirit which is within them and which acts through faith. It is the force of the Resurrection (Eph 1: 19-20).

- Matthew 14: 32-33: Jesus is the Son of God. Before the waves that come toward them, Peter begins to sink in the sea because of lack of faith. After Peter is saved, he and Jesus get into the boat and the wind calms down. The other disciples, who are in the boat, are astonished and bow before Jesus, recognizing that he is the Son of God: "Truly, you are the Son of God." Later, Peter also professes the same faith in Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Mt 16: 16) In this way Matthew suggests that it is not only Peter who sustains the faith of the disciples, but also that the faith of the disciples sustains Peter's faith.
- Matthew 14: 34-36: They brought all the sick to him. The episode of the crossing concludes with beautiful imagery: "Having made the crossing they came to Gennesaret. When the local people recognized him, they spread the news through the whole neighborhood and took all who were sick to him, begging him just to let them touch the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched it were saved".

Personal Questions

- Has there been a contrary wind in your life? What have you done to overcome it? Has this happened sometimes in the community? How was it overcome?
- Which is the crossing which the communities are doing today? From where to where? How does all this help us to recognize today the presence of Jesus in the contrary waves of life?

Concluding Prayer

Keep me far from the way of deceit, grant me the grace of your Law.

I have chosen the way of constancy,

I have molded myself to your judgements. (Ps 119: 29-30)

Wednesday, August 4, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of everlasting goodness, our origin and guide,
be close to us

and hear the prayers of all who praise you. Forgive our sins and restore us to life.

Keep us safe in your love.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 15: 21-28

Jesus left that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And suddenly out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, 'Lord, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.' But he said not a word in answer to her.

And his disciples went and pleaded with him, saying, 'Give her what she wants, because she keeps shouting after us.' He said in reply, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.'

But the woman had come up and was bowing low before him. 'Lord,' she said, 'help me.' He replied, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs.'

She retorted, 'Ah yes, Lord; but even little dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters' table.'

Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your desire be granted.' And from that moment her daughter was well again.

Reflection

- Context. The bread of the children and the great faith of a Canaanite woman is the theme presented in the liturgical passage taken from chapter 15 of Matthew. He proposes to the Gospel reader a further deepening of faith in Christ. The episode is preceded by an initiative of the pharisees and scribes who go down to Jerusalem and cause a dispute with Jesus. That did not last long, because Jesus, together with his disciples, withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. While he is on the way, a woman from a pagan place comes to him. This woman is identified by Matthew as a "Canaanite woman." In the Book of Deuteronomy, the inhabitants of Canaan were considered sinful, an evil and idolatrous people.
- The dynamic of the account: While Jesus carries out his activity in Galilee and is on the way to Tyre and Sidon, a woman came up to him and began to bother him with

a petition for help for her sick daughter. The woman addresses Jesus using the title “Son of David”; a title which sounds strange when pronounced by a pagan but that could be justified because of the extreme situation in which the woman lives. Perhaps this woman already believes in some way or to some extent in the person of Jesus as final Savior. But this idea is eliminated because in v. 28 her act of faith is recognized, precisely by Jesus. In the dialogue with the woman Jesus seems to show that distance and differences which existed between the people of Israel and the pagans. On one hand Jesus confirms to the woman the priority for Israel to have access to salvation.

Before the insistent prayer of her, Jesus seems to withdraw, to be at a distance, an incomprehensible attitude for the reader. But it is an act with teaching value. To the first invocation “Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David” (v. 22) Jesus does not respond. To the second intervention, this time on the part of the disciples who invite him to listen to the prayer of the woman, he only expresses rejection that stresses that secular distance between the chosen people and the pagan people. (vv. 23b-24) But at the insistence of the prayer of the woman who bows before Jesus, a harsh and mysterious response follows: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to little dogs” (v. 26). The woman goes beyond the harsh response of the words of Jesus and gets a small sign of hope: the woman recognizes that the plan of God being carried out by Jesus initially concerns the chosen people and Jesus asks the woman to recognize that priority; the woman takes advantage of that priority to present a strong reason to obtain the miracle: “Ah yes, Lord, but even little dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters’ table” (v. 27). The woman has exceeded the test of faith: “Woman, you have great faith” (v. 28); in fact, to the humble insistence of her faith corresponds a gesture of salvation.

This episode addresses an invitation to every reader of the Gospel to have that interior attitude of “openness” toward everyone, believers or not, an availability and acceptance without distinction toward all people.

Personal Questions

- The disturbing word of God invites you to break open your lack of openness and all your small plans. Are you capable to accept all the brothers and sisters who come to you?
- Are you aware of your poverty to be capable like the Canaanite woman to entrust yourself to the word of salvation of Jesus.

Concluding Prayer

Lord, do not thrust me away from your presence, do not take away from me your spirit of holiness. Give me back the joy of your salvation, sustain in me a generous spirit. (Ps 51: 11-12)

Thursday, August 5, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

"Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind with which You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus.

In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your suffering and death. Thus, the cross which had seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the resurrection and source of new life.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to Your voice in creation, in the Scriptures, in events, and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your Word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the power of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen."

Gospel Reading – Matthew 16: 13-23

A Key to the Reading:

In the entirety of the text, verses 13 to 23, Jesus turns to Peter and twice calls him "rock". Once he calls him the foundation stone (Mt 16: 18) and once the rock of scandal (Mt 16: 23). Both statements complement each other. While reading the text, it is good to pay attention to Peter's attitude and to the solemn words that Jesus addresses to him on two occasions.

A Division of the Text to Help with the Reading:

- 13-14: Jesus wishes to know what people think of him.
- 15-16: Jesus asks the disciples and Peter makes his confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of God!"
- 17-20: Then we have Jesus' solemn reply to Peter.
- 21-22: Jesus explains the meaning of Messiah, but Peter refuses to accept.
- 22-23: Jesus' solemn reply to Peter.

The Text:

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- Today there are many who want to put themselves before Jesus and His message. They come with an attitude that distorts His words, often for personal gain. Can you see and identify some of them? What rebuke might they be deserving of?
- Who do the people think Jesus is? Who do Peter and the disciples think Jesus is?
- There can be many ways to deny Jesus, for instance, to be embarrassed to discuss such things in "polite company." Have I ever denied Jesus?
- Peter is rock in two ways: what are they?
- What kind of rock is our community?
- In the text we find several opinions as to who Jesus is and several ways of presenting the faith. Today too, there are several opinions as to who Jesus is. Which opinions does our community know? What kind of mission does that imply for us?

A Key to the Reading

to enter deeper into the theme.

The Context:

In the narrative parts of his Gospel, Matthew follows the sequence of Mark's Gospel. However, he also quotes a source known to him and Luke. Rarely does he give information that is solely his, as in today's Gospel. This text and the dialogue between Jesus and Peter has various interpretations, even opposing ones in the various Christian churches. In the Catholic Church, this text forms the basis for the primacy of

Peter. Without diminishing in any way the importance of this text, it might be good to situate it in the context of Matthew's Gospel, where the qualities ascribed to Peter elsewhere are also attributed to other people. They do not belong exclusively to Peter.

Commentary on the Text:

- Matthew 16: 13-16 - The opinions of the people and those of the disciples concerning Jesus.

Jesus wishes to know what people think of Him. The answers are quite varied: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. When Jesus asks the disciples' opinion, Peter replies in their name: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Peter's reply is not new. On a previous occasion, when Jesus walked on the water, the other disciples had made a similar profession of faith: "Truly You are the Son of God!" (Mt 14: 33) This is an acknowledgment that in Jesus the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled. In John's Gospel, Martha makes the same profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of God who is come into the world" (Jn 11: 27)

- Matthew 16: 17 - Jesus' reply to Peter: Blessed are you, Peter!

Jesus proclaims Peter "blessed" because he has been given a revelation from the Father. Jesus' reply is not new. On a previous occasion, Jesus had made the same proclamation of blessedness to the disciples because they were hearing and seeing that which no one else knew before (Mt 13: 16), and He praised the Father because He had revealed the Son to little ones and not to the learned (Mt 11: 25). Peter is one of the little ones to whom the Father reveals Himself. The perception that God is present in Jesus does not "come from flesh and blood," it is not the result of study or merit of human effort, but a gift that God gives to whom He pleases.

- Matthew 16: 18-20 - Peter's qualifications: Being foundation stone and taking possession of the keys of the Kingdom.

- **Being Rock:** Peter has to be rock, that is, he has to be a strong foundation for the Church, so that she may stand up to the assaults. Through these words addressed by Jesus to Peter, Matthew encourages the suffering and persecuted communities in Syria and Palestine, who saw in Peter the leadership that had marked them from the beginning. In spite of being weak and persecuted, they had a solid foundation, guaranteed by the words of Jesus. In those days, the communities cultivated a very strong sentimental tie with the leaders who had established them. Thus, the communities of Syria and Palestine cultivated their relationship with the person of Peter; those of Greece with the person of Paul; some communities in Asia with the person of the beloved disciple and others with the person of John of the Apocalypse. Identifying themselves with the leader of their origin helped them to grow better in their identity and spirituality. But this also gave rise to conflict as in the case of the community of Corinth (1 Cor 1: 11-12). Even today, there are Christian communities, ecclesial communities, who follow a particular leader and identify with him or her.

- Being rock as foundation of the faith, recalls the words of God to the people

in exile in Babylonia: "Listen to me, you who pursue justice, who seek the Lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the pit from which you were quarried; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth; when he was but one, I called him, I blessed him and made him many" (Is 51: 1-2). When applied to Peter, this quality of foundation stone points to a new beginning for the people of God.

- **The keys of the Kingdom:** Peter receives the keys of the Kingdom to bind and to loose, that is, to reconcile people with God. The same power of binding and loosing is given to the communities (Mt 18: 8) and to the disciples (Jn 20: 23). One of the points on which the Gospel of Matthew insists is reconciliation and pardon (Mt 5: 7, 23-24, 38-42, 44-48; 6: 14-15; 18: 15-35). The reality is that in the 80s and 90s, there were many tensions and divisions within families in the communities in Syria because of faith in Jesus. Some accepted Him as Messiah whereas others did not, and this was the source of many contrasting views and conflicts. Matthew insists on reconciliation. Reconciliation kept on being one of the most important tasks of coordinators of the communities. Like Peter they must bind and loose, that is, work so as to bring about reconciliation, mutual acceptance, and build up true fraternity.
- **The Church:** the word "Church," in Greek, *ekklesia*, is found 105 times in the New Testament, almost always in the Acts and the Epistles. We find the word only three times in the Gospels and only in Matthew. The word means "a called assembly" or "chosen assembly". The word applies to the people gathered, called by the Word of God, a people that seeks to live the message of the Kingdom brought by Jesus. The Church is not the Kingdom, but an instrument and a sign of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is greater. In the Church, the community, all must see or should see what happens when a group of people allows God to rule and take possession of their life.

- Matthew 16: 21-22 - Jesus completes what is lacking in Peter's reply, and Peter reacts by not accepting it.

Peter had confessed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" In keeping with the prevailing ideology of the time, he imagined a glorious Messiah. Jesus corrects him: "It is necessary that the Messiah suffer and be killed in Jerusalem." With the words "it is necessary," He says that suffering had been foreseen in the prophecies (Is 53: 2-8). If the disciples accept Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, then they must accept Him also as the Servant Messiah who must die-- not just the triumph of glory but also the way of the cross! But Peter will not accept Jesus' correction and tries to change His mind.

- Matthew 16: 23 - Jesus' reply to Peter: Rock of scandal.

Jesus' reply is surprising: "Get behind me, Satan, you are a scandal to me, for you do not mind the things of God, but those of men!" Satan is the one who leads us away from the path marked out for us by God. Jesus literally says: "Get behind me!" (in Latin, *vada retro!*). Peter wanted to steer and point the way. Jesus says: "Get behind

me!" Jesus, not Peter, is the one who points the way and sets the rhythm. The disciple must follow the master. He must live in constant conversion. Jesus' word was also a message to all those who led the communities. They must "follow" Jesus and they may not go ahead as Peter wished to do. It is not only they who are able to point the way or the manner. On the contrary, like Peter, instead of being a rock of support, they can become rock of scandal, a stumbling block. Such were some leaders of the communities at the time of Matthew. There were ambiguities. The same may happen among us today.

A Further Explanation of the Gospels Concerning Peter:

A portrait of St. Peter.

Peter was transformed from fisherman of fish to fisherman of men (Mk 1: 7). He was married (Mk 1: 30). He was a good man and very human. He tended naturally to a role of leadership among the twelve disciples of Jesus. Jesus respected this natural quality and made Peter the leader of His first community (Jn 21: 17). Before joining Jesus' community, Peter's name was *Simon bar Jona* (Mt 16: 17), Simon son of Jonah. Jesus nicknamed him *Cephas* or *Rock*, and this then became Peter (Lk 6: 14).

By nature, Peter could have been anything but rock. He was courageous in speech, but at the hour of danger he fell victim to fear and fled. For instance, when Jesus came walking on the water, Peter asked: "Jesus, can I too come to you on the water?" Jesus replied: "Come, Peter!" Peter then went out of the boat and started walking on the water. But when a bigger wave came along, he was afraid and began to sink. He then cried out: "Save me, Lord!" Jesus took hold of him and saved him (Mt 14: 28-31). At the last supper, Peter said to Jesus: "I shall never deny you, Lord!" (Mk 14: 31); yet a few hours later, in the palace of the high priest, in front of a servant girl, when Jesus had already been arrested, Peter denied Jesus, swearing that he had no connection with Him (Mk 14: 66-72). In the garden of olives, when Jesus had been arrested, he even used his word (Jn 18: 10), but then fled, leaving Jesus alone (Mk 14: 50).

Peter was not naturally rock! And yet the weak and human Peter, so like us, did become rock because Jesus had prayed for him: "Peter, I have prayed for you so that your faith may not fail; and, when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22: 31-32). That is why Jesus was able to say: "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church" (Mt 16: 18). Jesus helped him to become a rock. After the resurrection, in Galilee, Jesus appeared to Peter and asked him twice: "Peter, do you love Me?" And Peter replied twice: "Lord, you know that I love you" (Jn 21: 15, 16). When Jesus put the same question to him the third time, Peter was hurt. He must have remembered that he had denied Him three times. So he answered: "Lord, you know all things! You know that I love you!" It was then that Jesus entrusted to him the care of the sheep: "Peter, feed My sheep!" (Jn 21: 17).

With Jesus' help, the strength of the rock grew in Peter, and He revealed Himself on the day of Pentecost. On that day, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, Peter opened the doors of the upper room where they were all gathered behind closed doors for fear of the Jews (Jn 20: 19), and, infused with courage, began to announce the Good News of Jesus to the people (Acts 2: 14-40). From then on, he never stopped! Because of this courageous proclamation of the resurrection, he was arrested (Acts 4: 3). During the interrogation he was forbidden to announce the Good News (Acts 4: 18), but Peter did not obey the prohibition. He said: "We must obey God rather than man!" (Acts 4: 19; 5: 29). He was arrested again (Acts 5: 18, 26). He was scourged (Acts 5: 40). But he said: "Thank you very much. But we shall go on!" (cf. Acts 5: 42).

Tradition tells us that at the end of his life, when he was in Rome, Peter had another moment of fear. But then he went back, was arrested, and condemned to death on the cross. However, he asked that he might be crucified with his head down. He thought that he was not worthy to die in the same way as his master, Jesus. Peter was true to himself and to Jesus to the very end.

Psalm 103 (102)

Thanksgiving

Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagles.

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always chide, nor will He keep His anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him.

For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who

fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments.

The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all.

Bless the Lord, O you His angels, you mighty ones who do His word, hearkening to the voice of His word!

Bless the Lord, all His hosts, his ministers that do His will!

Bless the Lord, all His works, in all places of His dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul!

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen the Word but also practice it. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Friday, August 6, 2015

The Transfiguration of the Lord

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading – Mark 9: 2-10

A Key to the Reading:

On this Solemnity, the Church meditates on the Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of the three disciples who joined him on the mountain. The Transfiguration takes place after the first announcement of the death of Jesus (Lk 9: 21-22). This announcement had confused the disciples and especially Peter. When we take a close look at the small details, we see that the text describes the transfiguration in a way that makes us aware of how this unusual experience of Jesus was able to help the disciples overcome the crisis in which they found themselves. As we read, let us try to pay attention to the following: "How did the transfiguration take place and what was the reaction of the disciples towards this experience?"

A Division of the Text to Help Our Reading:

- Mark 9: 2-4: The Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of his disciples
- Mark 9: 5-6: Peter's reaction to the transfiguration
- Mark 9: 7-8: The voice from heaven that explains the meaning of the Transfiguration
- Mark 9: 9-10: Keeping secret what they had seen

Text:

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain on their own by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: ³ his clothes became brilliantly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. ⁴ Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter spoke to Jesus, 'Rabbi,' he said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' ⁶ He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. ⁷ And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.' ⁸ Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them anymore but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down from the mountain, he warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ They observed the warning faithfully, though among themselves they discussed what 'rising from the dead' could mean.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- Which part of the text did you like most or that touched you most? Why?
- How does the transfiguration take place and what is the reaction of the disciples to this experience?
- Why does the text present Jesus with brilliant clothes while he is speaking with Moses and Elijah? Who are Moses and Elijah for Jesus? Who are they for the disciples?
- What is the message of the voice from heaven for Jesus? And what is the message for the disciples?
- How can we *transfigure*, today, our personal and family life and the life of the community in our area?

Going Deeper into the Theme

The Context Then and Now

The foretelling of the passion sank the disciples into a deep crisis. They lived among the poor, but in their minds, they were confused, lost as they were in the propaganda of the government and of the official religion of their time (Mk 8: 15). That religion taught that the Messiah would be glorious and victorious! That is why Peter reacts strongly against the cross (Mk 8: 32). Someone condemned to die on the cross could not be the Messiah, rather, according to the Law of God, he had to be considered “cursed by God” (Dt 21: 22-23). In these circumstances, the experience of the Transfiguration of Jesus was able to help the disciples overcome the trauma of the Cross. In fact, at the Transfiguration, Jesus appears in glory and speaks with Moses and Elijah of his Passion and Death (Lk 9: 31). The journey towards glory, then, is through the cross.

In the 70's, when Mark is writing his Gospel, the Cross was a great obstacle for the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah. How could it be that one crucified, one who died as one marginalized, was the great Messiah expected for centuries by the people? The cross was an obstacle to believing in Jesus. "The cross is a scandal," they said (1 Cor 1: 23). The community did not know how to respond to the critical questions put to them by the Jews. One of the great efforts of the early Christians was that of assisting people to see that the cross was neither scandal nor madness, but rather the expression of the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1: 22-31). Mark's Gospel contributes to that effort. He uses texts from the Old Testament to describe the scene of the Transfiguration. He shed light on the events of the life of Jesus and shows that Jesus fulfils the prophecies and that the Cross is the way that leads to Glory. It was not just the cross of Jesus that was a problem! In the 70's, the cross of persecution was part of every-day life for Christians. In fact, just a little time before, Nero had launched his persecution, and many died. Today too, many people suffer because they are Christians and because they live the Gospel.

How do we approach the cross? What does it mean? With these questions in mind, we meditate and comment on the text of the transfiguration.

A Commentary on the Text:

- Mark 9: 2-4: Jesus looks different.

Jesus goes up a high mountain. Luke adds that he goes there to pray (Lk 9: 28). There, on the summit of the mountain, Jesus appears in glory in the presence of Peter, James, and John. Together with him appear Moses and Elijah. The high mountain recalls Mount Sinai, where in times past, God had made known his will to the people by presenting the law to Moses. The white clothes of Jesus recall Moses shrouded in light as he speaks to God on the Mountain and as he receives the law from God (cf. Ex 34: 29-35). Elijah and Moses, the two great authorities of the Old Testament, speak with Jesus. Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets. Luke says that they talked about the death of Jesus in Jerusalem (Lk 9: 31). Thus, it was clear that the Old Testament, both the Law and the Prophets, taught that the way to glory is through the cross (Cf Is 53)

- Mark 9: 5-6: Peter likes what is happening but does not understand.

Peter likes what is going on and wants this pleasing moment on the Mountain to last. He suggests building three tents. Mark says that Peter was afraid and did not know what he was saying, and Luke adds that the disciples were sleepy (Lk 9: 32). For them, as it is for us, it is difficult to understand the Cross!

The description of the transfiguration begins with an affirmation: "Six days later." What six days are these? Some scholars explain this phrase thus: Peter wants to build three tents, because it was the sixth day of the Feast of Tents. This was a very popular feast of six days that celebrated the gift of the Law of God and the forty years spent in the desert. To recall these forty years, the people had to spend six days in temporary tents. That is why it was called the Feast of the Tents. If they could not celebrate the whole six days, they had to celebrate at least the sixth day. The affirmation "six days later" would then be an allusion to the Feast of the Tents. That is why Peter recalls the duty of building tents. And spontaneously, he offers himself to build the tents. Thus Jesus, Moses, and Elijah would have been able to go on talking.

- Mark 9: 7: The voice from heaven shed light on the events.

As soon as Jesus is shrouded in glory, a voice from heaven says: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" The expression "Beloved Son" recalls the figure of the Servant Messiah, proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 42: 1). The expression "Listen to him" recalls the prophecy that promised the coming of the new Moses (cf. Dt 18: 15). In Jesus, the prophecies of the Old Testament are being fulfilled. The disciples could not doubt this. The Christians of the 70's could not doubt this. Jesus is truly the glorious Messiah, but the way to glory is through the cross, the second proclamation made in the prophecy of the Servant (Is 53: 3-9). The glory of the Transfiguration is

proof of this. Moses and Elijah confirm this. The Father is the guarantor of this. Jesus accepts this.

- Mark 9: 8: Only Jesus and no one else!

Mark says that after the vision, the disciples see only Jesus and no one else. The emphasis on the affirmation that they see only Jesus suggests that from now on Jesus is the only revelation of God for us! For us Christians, Jesus, and only Jesus, is the key to understanding the complete meaning of the Old Testament.

- Mark 9: 9-10: Knowing how to keep silent.

Jesus asks his disciples not to say anything to anyone until he would have risen from the dead, but the disciples do not understand him. Indeed, anyone who does not link suffering to the resurrection, does not understand the meaning of the Cross. Jesus is stronger than death.

- Mark 9: 11-13: The return of the prophet Elijah.

The prophet Malachi had proclaimed that Elijah was to return to prepare the way of the Messiah (Mal 3: 23-24). This same proclamation is also found in the book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 48: 10). Then, how could Jesus be the Messiah if Elijah had not returned yet? That is why the disciples asked: "Why do the Scribes say that Elijah must come first?" (9: 11). Jesus' reply is clear: "I tell you that Elijah has come and they have treated him as they pleased, just as the scriptures say about him." (9: 13) Jesus was referring to John the Baptist who was murdered by Herod (Mt 17: 13).

Further information:

- The Transfiguration: the change that takes place in the practice of Jesus

In the middle of conflicts with the Pharisees and Herodians (Mk 8: 11-21), Jesus leaves Galilee and goes to the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8: 27), where he begins to prepare his disciples. On the way, he puts a question to them: "Who do people say I am?" (Mk 8: 27) After listening to their reply that they considered him the Messiah, Jesus begins to speak of his passion and death (Mk 8: 31). Peter reacts: "Heaven preserve you, Lord!" (Mt 16: 22). Jesus replies: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do!" (Mk 8: 33) This was a moment of crisis for the disciples, who still held on to the thought of a glorious Messiah (Mk 8: 32-33; 9: 32), not understanding Jesus' reply and trying to divert it in another direction. It was close to the Feast of the Tents, (cf Lk 9: 33), when the popular messianic expectation was much stronger than usual. Jesus goes up the mountain to pray (Lk 9: 28). He overcomes temptation by prayer. The revelation of the Kingdom was different from that which the people imagined. The victory of the Servant would take place through the death sentence (Is 50: 4-9; 53: 1-12). The cross appears on the horizon, not just as a possibility, but as a certainty. From this moment on a change takes place in Jesus' practice. Here are some important signs of this change:

- **Few miracles.** At first there are many miracles. Now, beginning with Mk 8: 27; Mt 16: 13 and Lk 9: 18, miracles are almost an exception in Jesus' activities.

- **Proclaiming the Passion.** Earlier there was talk of the passion as a remote possibility (Mk 3: 6). Now there is constant talk of it (Mk 8: 31; 9: 9, 31; 10: 33, 38).
- **Taking up the Cross.** Earlier, Jesus proclaimed the imminent coming of the Kingdom. Now he insists on watchfulness, the demands on those who follow him and the necessity to take up one's cross (Mt 16: 24-26; 19: 27-30; 24: 42-51; 25: 1-13; Mk 8: 34; 10: 28-31; Lk 9: 23-26, 57-62; 12: 8-9, 35-48; 14: 25-33; 17: 33; 18: 28-30).
- **He teaches the disciples.** Earlier he taught the people. Now he is more concerned with the formation of his disciples. He asks them to choose again (Jn 6: 67) and begins to prepare them for the future mission. He goes out of the city to stay with them and busy himself with their formation (Mk 8: 27; 9: 28, 30-35; 10: 10, 23, 28-32; 11: 11).
- **Different parables.** Earlier, the parables revealed the mystery of the Kingdom present in the activities of Jesus. Now the parables tend towards the future judgement, at the end of time: the murderous vine growers (Mt 21: 33-46); the merciless servant (Mt 18: 23-35), the workers of the eleventh hour (Mt 20: 1-16), the two sons (Mt 21: 28-32), the wedding banquet (Mt 22: 1-14), the ten talents (Mt 25: 14-30).

Jesus accepts the will of the Father that is revealed in the new situation and decides to go to Jerusalem (Lk 9: 51). He takes this decision with such determination as to frighten his disciples, who cannot understand what is going on (Mk 10: 32; Lk 18: 31-34). In the society of that time, the proclamation of the Kingdom as Jesus proclaimed it, could not be tolerated. So either he had to change or he had to die! Jesus did not change his proclamation. He continued to be faithful to the Father and to the poor. That is why he was sentenced to death!

- The transfiguration and the return of the prophet Elijah

In Mark's Gospel, the scene of the transfiguration is linked to the question of the return of the prophet Elijah (Mk 9: 9-13). In those days, people expected the return of the prophet Elijah and were not aware that Elijah had already returned in the person of John the Baptist (Mk 9: 13). The same thing happens today. Many people live in expectation of the return of Jesus and even write on the walls of cities: *Jesus will return!* They are not aware that Jesus is already present in our lives. Every now and then, like an unexpected flash of lightning, this presence of Jesus breaks out and shines, transforming our lives. A question that each of us should ask is: Has my faith in Jesus offered me a moment of transfiguration and intense joy? How have such moments of joy given me strength in moments of difficulties?

The Prayer of a Psalm: Psalm 27 (26)

The Lord is My Light

Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?

Yahweh is the fortress of my life, whom should I dread?

When the wicked advance against me to eat me up, they, my opponents, my enemies, are the ones who stumble and fall. Though an army pitch camp against me, my heart will not fear,

though war break out against me, my trust will never be shaken.

One thing I ask of Yahweh, one thing I seek:

to dwell in Yahweh's house all the days of my life, to enjoy the sweetness of Yahweh, to seek out his temple.

For he hides me away under his roof on the day of evil, he folds me in the recesses of his tent, sets me high on a rock.

Now my head is held high above the enemies who surround me; in his tent I will offer sacrifices of acclaim. I will sing,

I will make music for Yahweh. Yahweh, hear my voice as I cry, pity me, answer me!

Of you my heart has said, 'Seek his face!'

Your face, Yahweh, I seek; do not turn away from me.

Do not thrust aside your servant in anger, without you I am helpless.

Never leave me, never forsake me, God, my Savior.

Though my father and mother forsake me, Yahweh will gather me up.

Yahweh, teach me your way,

lead me on the path of integrity because of my enemies; do not abandon me to the will of my foes

false witnesses have risen against me and are breathing out violence.

This I believe: I shall see the goodness of Yahweh, in the land of the living.

Put your hope in Yahweh, be strong,

let your heart be bold, put your hope in Yahweh.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Saturday, August 7, 2021

Ordinary Time

Prayer

Show us your continued kindness, Father, and watch your people,
as we acknowledge your guide and your lead.renews the work of your creation
and guard what you have renewed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ ...

Gospel Reading – Matthew 17: 14-20

At that time, when they came to the crowd a man approached, knelt down before Jesus, and said, "Lord, have pity on my son, for he is a lunatic and suffers severely; often he falls into fire, and often into water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him." Jesus said in reply, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring him here to me." Jesus rebuked him and the demon came out of him, and from that hour the boy was cured. Then the disciples approached Jesus in private and said, "Why could we not drive it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Reflection

- Context. Our passage has Jesus in his work of healing. After having stayed with the disciples alone in the region of Caesarea Philippi (16: 13-28) Jesus climbs a high mountain and is transfigured before three disciples (from 17: 1-10). He then reaches the crowd (17: 14, 21) attempting a new approach to Galilee (17: 22). What can we think of these geographical shifts of Jesus? It cannot be excluded that there is a geographical value to them. However, Matthew stresses their role in the spiritual journey. In its journey of faith, the community is increasingly called upon to retrace that spirituality which marked the life of Jesus from Galilee during his public life and that of his resurrection by way of the cross. It is a spiritual journey in which the power of faith naturally plays a crucial role.
- The power of faith. Jesus, after his transfiguration, with his small community of disciples left the crowd, before returning to Galilee (v. 22) and arriving in Capernaum (v.24). While with the crowd, a man approached him and begged him to stronger urged Jesus to intervene with the evil that keeps his son imprisoned. The description preceding the intervention of Jesus is clear: this is a case of epilepsy with all its pathological consequences on the psychic level. At the time of Jesus, this type of illness was traced to evil forces, specifically the action of Satan the origin of all evil,

enemy of God and man. Faced with such evil forces far beyond their capabilities, the disciples find themselves powerless to heal the child (vv. 16-19). They lack the necessary faith (V. 20).

For the evangelist, this young epileptic is a symbol of those who devalue the power of faith (V. 20), who are not mindful of the presence of God in their midst (V. 17). The presence of God in Jesus, Emmanuel, is not recognized. We need the true faith. After Jesus rebuked the crowd, they bring the boy to Jesus: "Bring him here to me" (V. 17). He heals and frees the young man when rebuked the devil. This is not simply the miracle of healing a single person. The weak and uncertain faith of the disciples must also be healed. Jesus approaches them who are confused or dazed by their impotence: "Because we could not drive him out?" (V. 20). Jesus' answer is clear: "Because of your wavering faith." Jesus calls for faith that can move mountains if we are to identify with his person, his mission, his divine power. It is true that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. But they still fail to heal the epileptic boy because of their "little faith." It is not total lack of faith, only that it is a weak faith, vacillating, dominated by mistrust and doubt.

Personal Questions

- Through musical meditation we observed that the disciples are placed in relation to epileptic and Jesus himself. You also find your way relationship with Jesus and with others using the power of faith?
- On the cross Jesus gives witness to the Father and reveals completely. Jesus' words that you thought you asked the total membership: you feel every day committed to move the heart of the mountains that stand between your self-interest and the will of God?

Final Prayer

The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, stronghold in times of trouble.
Those who honor your name trust in you; you never forsake those who seek you, LORD. (Psalm 9)

Sunday, August 8, 2021

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Bread of Life

Opening Prayer

Shaddai, God of the mountain, You who make of our fragile life the rock of your dwelling place, lead our mind

to strike the rock of the desert,

so that water may gush to quench our thirst.

May the poverty of our feelings

cover us as with a mantle in the darkness of the night and may it open our heart to hear the echo of silence until the dawn,

wrapping us with the light of the new morning, may bring us,

with the spent embers of the fire of the shepherds of the Absolute who have kept vigil for us close to the divine Master,

the flavor of the holy memory.

Lectio

Gospel Text: John 6: 41-51

⁴¹ The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." ⁴² They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³ Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

A Key to the Reading:

The sixth chapter of John's Gospel presents a complete picture around the Paschal theme and, analogously, with the telling of a miracle (5: 1-9a; 6: 1-15) followed by a discourse (5: 16-47; 6: 22-59). The chapter relates that part of Jesus' activity in Galilee, precisely at its most sublime moment, when Jesus reveals himself as bread of life to be believed in and eaten in order to be saved. In vv. 1-15 we find the great sign of the so-

called multiplication of the loaves whose significance is revealed in the discourse of the following day in vv. 26-59: the gift of bread to satisfy the hunger of the people prepares the way for the words concerning the bread of eternal life. Inserted, vv. 16-21, we find the story of Jesus walking on the water. In vv. 60-71 Jesus, knowing their lack of faith (vv. 60-66) and trying to encourage their faith (vv. 66-71), invites the twelve disciples to make up their minds. The whole discourse on the bread of life (6: 25-71) presents parallels with some Hebrew texts, especially with Philon.

A Moment of Silence:

Let the sound of the Word echo in us.

Meditatio

A Few Questions:

- They murmured at him: how many are the voices that murmur against God?
- I am the bread which has come down from heaven: where do we acquire the bread that we eat every day?
- No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him: does the Father draw us or do we drag our feet behind him criticizing that which he says to us in our daily life?
- If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever: we nourish ourselves with the Word of God and the broken Bread once a week or even every day... why is it that eternal life is not evident in our words and our human experience?

A Key to the Reading:

- To murmur. What better way is there for us not to live in depth than which the Lord asks of us? There are thousands of plausible reasons... thousands of valid justifications... thousands of licit motives... for us not to swallow a Word that defies every reason, every justification, every motivation to allow new echoes to resonate from a not-so-distant heaven that dwells in our hearts.
- v. 41. The Jews murmured at him because he had said: "I am the bread which came down from heaven." Jesus had just said: I am the bread of life (v. 35) and I have come down from heaven (v. 38) and this provokes dissent among the crowd. The term Jews is a theological one in John and may be thought of as synonymous with unbelievers. In truth these were Galileans who were called Jews because they murmured at Christ whose words disturbed their usual categories. The Jews were familiar with the term "bread come down from heaven." The children of Israel knew the bread of God, the manna, which had satisfied their hunger in the desert and had given security to a precarious journey whose horizons were uncertain. Christ, manna for humankind who in the desert of an unsatisfied hunger invokes heaven to sustain it on its journey. This is the only bread that satisfies hunger. The words of the Jews are an objection to the person of Jesus and an occasion to introduce the theme of

unbelief. In other passages the people "whisper" about Jesus (7: 12, 32), but in this chapter they "murmur" about what he says, about his words. This murmuring puts an emphasis on their unbelief and incomprehension.

- v. 42. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph whose father and mother we know? How does he now say: I have come down from heaven?" This is subtle irony. The unbelievers know the earthly origins of the Christ. They know for certain the son of Joseph, but not the son of God. Only those who believe know his transcendental origin by the direct intervention of God in the Virgin. The passage goes from material language, bread made from water and flour to a spiritual language, bread for the human soul. As once the people in the desert did, the Jews murmur: they do not understand the origin of Jesus' gift: and as once their forbears refused the manna because it was too light, so now the descendants refuse the Word made flesh, bread come down from heaven, because of its earthly origin. The Jews, from all that Jesus said, only take note that he had said: I have come down from heaven (v. 38). Yet this is that which gives substance to all that was said before about being the bread of life (v. 35). The question: Is not this... is asked in a context of surprise in the Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew and Luke, through the story of Jesus' childhood, the reader has already been told of the virginal conception of Jesus. In John, the Galileans are confronted with someone who claims to have come down from heaven without any previous discussion as to his human condition. Son of Joseph means that Jesus is a man like all other men (cfr. 1: 45).
- v. 43-44. Jesus answered them: "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Jesus does not seem to dwell on his divine origin but stresses that only those drawn by the Father can come to him. Faith then is a gift of God and depends on a person's openness and ability to listen... but what does it mean to say the Father draws? Is not a person free on this journey? The attraction is simply the desire written in the tablets of flesh borne in the heart of every person. Thus, complete freedom exists in a spontaneous clinging to the source of one's being. Life can only attract life, only death cannot attract.
- v. 45. It is written in the prophets: "And they shall all be taught by God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to me." The rest of the narrative follows a very precise order. These words are not an invitation, but a command. The creative Word of God, who called light and all other creatures into existence from nothing, now calls his own likeness to participate in the new creation. The consequence does not flow from an autonomous and personal decision, but from meeting with the person of Jesus and his call. It is a graced event, not a human choice. Jesus does not wait for a free decision but calls with divine authority as God called the prophets in the Old Testament. It is not the disciples who choose the Master as was the case with rabbis at the time, but the Master who chooses the disciples as beneficiaries of God's inheritance, which is much greater than any doctrine or teaching. The call implies the giving up of family, profession, a complete change of one's way of life in order to cling to a way of life that leaves no space for self-centeredness. The disciples are people of the kingdom. The call to become

disciples of Jesus is an "eschatological call." The words of the Babylonian prophet of the exile says: "and all her children (Jerusalem's) shall be" - referring to the Jews. The use of: "all shall be" is an expression of the universality of salvation whose fulfilment is Jesus.

- v. 46. *Not that anyone has seen the Father, except him who comes from God, he has seen the Father.* Only Jesus, who is from God, has seen the Father and can reveal him definitively. People are called to come from God. Knowledge of the Father is not a conquest, it is an origin. The movement is not external. If I look for an external origin, I can say that I have a father and mother, a creature of the created world. If I look for a deeper origin of my essential being I can say that I come from the Father, Creator of all life.
- v. 47. *Truly, truly, I say to you: He who believes has eternal life.* To believe in the words of Jesus, in his revelation, is a condition for obtaining eternal life and to be able to be "taught by the Father." I believe, I lean on a rock. The strength is not within my creature limitations, nor in the realization of my creature efforts to attain perfection. All is firm in Him who has no temporal attachments. How can a creature lean on itself when it is not master of one single instant of its life?
- v. 48. *I am the bread of life.* Again, the theme of the bread of life is presented together with that of faith and of eternal life. Jesus is the true bread of life. This verse relates to verse 51 "*I am the living bread*". Only he who eats this bread, he who assimilates Jesus' revelation as vital bread, will be able to live.
- vv. 49-50. Your Fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died: this is the bread which comes down from heaven that a man may eat of it and not die. The bread come down from heaven is contrasted with the manna that fed their fathers but not preserved them from death. This bread that gives life without end and comes from on high is the incarnate Word of God. The Eucharistic theme, already implied in some expressions, now becomes central. Earthly death does not contradict this experience of life if one walks along transcendental ways. The limitation is no limitation for those who eat of Him.
- vv. 51. *I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.*" The "flesh" of Jesus is the vital food for the believer. The word flesh (*sàrx*), which in the Bible indicates the fragile reality of the human person before the mystery of God, now refers to the body of Christ immolated on the cross and to the human reality of the Word of God. It is no longer a metaphorical bread of life, it is the revelation of Jesus because the bread is the very flesh of the Son. For the life of the world means in favor of and emphasizes the sacrificial dimension of Christ because for the world expresses the salvation which flows from that dimension.

Reflection:

Murmur. If our murmuring were like a soft breeze, it would act as a harmonious basis for the eternal words that become our flesh: I am the living Bread that has come down from heaven. What a surprise that would be, knowing that this eternal Bread is not a

stranger, but Jesus, the son of Joseph, a man whose father and mother we know. We eat and we are assumed because those who eat of this bread will live forever. This is a bread that is born of the love of the Father. We are invited to listen and learn from Him on the trajectory of attraction, on that peak of faith that allows us to see. Bread with bread, Flesh with flesh. Only He who comes from God has seen the Father. When we have made of our flesh the table of the living Bread, then we shall have seen the Father. Desert and death, heaven and life. A sweet marriage fulfilled in every Eucharist ... on every altar, on the altar of the heart where the life of the divine Breath consumes the disfigured lineaments of a lost person.

Oratio

Psalms 33 (32)

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses.

The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to naught; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

The counsel of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love,

that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.

Contemplatio

The experience of the food that satisfies the hunger of the heart reminds me, Lord, that I can pass from imperfection to the fulfilment of being a reflection of yourself. I do not do away with the hunger, but by finding in it no longer a *homo dormiens*, (someone who does not ask questions of himself, who lives without any interest, who does not wish to see or feel, who will not allow himself to be touched, who lives in fear, superficially rather than in depth, and who keeps a horizontal position when confronted by events, sleeping or ignoring whatever he meets). Rather I find a *homo vigilans*, he who is always present to himself and others, capable of satisfying himself by his work and service. I find one who responsibly does not stop at that which is immediate, but who knows how to pace himself for the long and patient waiting, who expresses the all that dwells in each fragment of his life. I find one who no longer fears feeling vulnerable, because he knows that the wounds of his humanity can be transformed into scars through which life joins in the passing of time. It is a life that is finally able to realize his end and that sings with love in his "scarred heart" wrapped in a "flame that consumes but does not hurt" and in order to meet him definitively is prepared to "tear the veil."

Hunger is no longer hunger, because it now becomes the sweet burden of limitation, protected by "the delicious wound" and always open to the "sweet encounter" that will

satisfy every desire: "The Beloved is the mountain, the solitary valleys full of shade... He is like the calm night, very close to dawn, a silent music, a resounding silence... Who will heal this my scarred heart? He is the consuming flame that does not hurt! O my Beloved, tear the veil at the moment of our sweet encounter."

Monday, August 9, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God,

your Spirit made us Your children, confident to call You Father.

Increase Your Spirit within us and bring us to our promised inheritance.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 17: 22-27

As Jesus and his disciples were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were overwhelmed with grief. When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, "Does not your teacher pay the temple tax?" "Yes," he said. When he came into the house, before he had time to speak, Jesus asked him, "What is your opinion, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take tolls or census tax? From their subjects or from foreigners?" When he said, "From foreigners," Jesus said to him, "Then the subjects are exempt. But that we may not offend them, go to the sea, drop in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the temple tax. Give that to them for me and for you."

Reflection

The five verses of today's Gospel speak about two very different themes between them. (a) The second announcement of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Mt 17: 22-23); and (b) they report Jesus' conversation with Peter about paying the taxes and the dues to the temple (Mt 17: 24-27).

- Matthew 17: 22-23: The prediction of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first prediction (Mt 16: 21) had produced a strong reaction in Peter, who did not want to know anything about suffering nor the cross. Jesus had answered just as strongly: "Get behind Me, Satan!" (Mt 16: 23). Here, in the second prediction, the reaction of the disciples is less strong, less aggressive. The prediction produces sadness. It seems that now they begin to understand that the cross forms part of the journey. The

proximity of the death and the suffering weigh heavily on them, giving rise to a great discouragement. Even if Jesus tries to help them, the resistance of centuries against the idea of a crucified Messiah, was much greater.

- Matthew 17: 24-25a: The question which the tax collectors ask Peter concerning the taxes. When they reached Capernaum, the tax collector of the taxes of the Temple asks Peter, "Does your Master not pay the half-shekel for the Temple?" Peter answered: "Yes." From the time of Nehemiah (V Century BC), the Jews who had returned from the Babylonian exile committed themselves solemnly in the Assembly to pay the various taxes and dues in order to allow the Temple to continue to function and to take care of the maintenance both of the priestly service and of the building of the Temple. (Neh 10: 33-40). From what we can see from Peter's response, Jesus paid the taxes like any other Jew.
- Matthew 17 :25b-26: Jesus' question to Peter concerning the taxes. The conversation between Jesus and Peter is very strange. When they reach home, Jesus asked, "Simon, what is your opinion? From whom do earthly kings take toll or tribute? From their sons or from foreigners?" Peter responds, "From foreigners." And Jesus says, "Therefore, the sons are exempt!" Probably, here we can see a discussion among the Christian Jews before the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. They asked themselves if they had to continue to pay the taxes of the Temple, as they did before. By Jesus' response they discover that they are not obliged to pay this tax: "The sons are exempt!" The sons are the Christians, but even if they are not obliged to pay, the recommendation of Jesus is to pay in order not to cause scandal.
- Matthew 17: 27: The conclusion of the conversation on the paying of the tax. The solution which Jesus gives to this situation is even stranger. He tells Peter, "However, so that we shall not be the downfall of others, go to the lake and cast a hook: take the first fish that rises, open its mouth and there you will find a shekel; take it and give it to them for Me and for yourself." This was a strange miracle, strange as that of the 2000 pigs which rushed down into the sea (Mk 5: 13). Whichever is the interpretation of this miraculous fact, this way of resolving the problem suggests that it is a question that is not too important for Jesus.

Personal Questions

- The suffering of the Cross discourages and saddens the disciples. Has this ever happened in your life?
- How do you interpret the episode of the coin found in the mouth of the fish
- What is the significance of using a fish here? Is there meaning to this that would be lost if it were just a matter of finding or having a coin instead?

Concluding Prayer

Praise Yahweh from the heavens, praise Him in the heights.

Praise Him, all His angels, praise Him, all His host! (Ps 148: 1-2)

Tuesday, August 10, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, your Spirit made us your children, confident to call you Father.

Increase your Spirit within us and bring us to our promised inheritance.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 12: 24-26

Jesus said to his disciples: In all truth I tell you, unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.

Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Whoever serves me, must follow me, and my servant will be with me wherever I am. If anyone serves me, my Father will honor him.

Reflection

- This passage contains solemn and crucial words concerning the modality with which the mission of Jesus and of his disciples “produces much fruit.” But in this solemn and central declaration of Jesus; “unless a wheat grain falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a large harvest” (v. 24), it is inserted in that narrative context of 12: 12-36 where the encounter of Jesus as Messiah with Israel is narrated and the rejection of the Jews of his Messianic proposal. Which are the principal themes that describe the Messianism of Jesus? The Jews expected a Messiah who would be a powerful king, who would continue with the royal style of David and would restore to Israel its glorious past. Instead, Jesus places in the center of his Messianism the gift of his life and the possibility given to man to be able to accept God’s project on his life.
- The story of a seed. The gift of his life, as a crucial characteristic of his Messianism, Jesus outlines it with a mini parable. He describes a central and decisive event of his life drawing from the agricultural environment from where he takes the images to

render his parables interesting and immediate. It is the story of a seed: a small parable to communicate with the people in a simple and transparent way: a seed begins its course or journey in the dark of the earth, where it is suffocated and withers but in the Spring, it becomes a green stalk and in the Summer a spike charged with grain. The focal points of the parable are two: the production of much fruit; and, the finding of eternal life. The seed that breaks through the darkness of earth has been interpreted by the Early Fathers of the Church as a symbolical reference to the Incarnation of the Son of God. In the ground it seems that the vital force of the seed is destined to get lost because the seed withers and dies. But then the surprise of nature: in the summer when the spikes turn golden, the profound secret of that death is revealed. Jesus knows that death is becoming imminent, threatens his person, even though he does not see it as a beast that devours. It is true that it has the characteristics of darkness, but for Jesus it contains the secret force typical of childbirth, a mystery of fecundity and of life. In the light of this vision one can understand another expression used by Jesus: "Anyone who loves his life will lose it and anyone who hates his own life in this world will preserve it for eternal life". Anyone who considers his own life as a cold property to be lived in egoism is like a seed closed in itself and without any perspective of life. On the contrary who "hates his life," a very sharp Semitic expression to indicate the renunciation of only fulfilling oneself applied to the axis of the meaning of an existence on the donation to others; it is only thus that life becomes creative: it is a source of peace, of happiness and of life. It is the reality of the seed that sprouts. But the reader can also get in the mini parable of Jesus another dimension, that of the "Passover." Jesus knows that in order to lead humanity to the threshold of divine love he has to go through the dark way of death on the cross. On the trail of this life the disciple also faces his own "hour," that of death, with the certainty that it will lead to eternal life to full communion with God.

- In synthesis. The story of the seed is that of dying in order to multiply itself; its function is that of a service to life. The annihilation of Jesus is comparable to the seed of life buried in the earth. In Jesus' life to love is to serve and to serve is to lose oneself in the life of others, to die to oneself in order to allow others to live. While his "hour" is approaching, the conclusion of his mission, Jesus assures his own with the promise of a consolation and of a joy without end, accompanied, by every type of disturbance or trouble. He gives the example of the seed that has to wither and of the woman who has to give birth in the pangs of childbirth. Christ has chosen the cross for himself and for his own: anyone who wants to be his disciple is called to share his same itinerary. He has always spoken to his disciples in a radical way: «Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, will save it" (Lk 9: 24).

Personal Questions

- Does your life express the gift of yourself? Is it a seed of love that makes love be born? Are you aware that to be a seed of joy, so that there will be joy in the field of wheat grain the moment of sowing is necessary?
- Can you say that you have chosen the Lord if later you do not embrace the cross with him? When the hard struggle breaks out in you between “yes” or “no,” between courage and fear, between faith and unbelief, between love and egoism, do you feel lost thinking that such temptations are not suitable to those who follow Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

All goes well for one who lends generously, who is honest in all his dealing;
for all time to come he will not stumble,
for all time to come the upright will be remembered. (Ps 112: 5-6)

Wednesday, August 11, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, your Spirit made us your children, confident to call you Father.

Increase your Spirit within us and bring us to our promised inheritance.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 18: 15-20

Jesus said to his disciples. 'If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you: whatever the misdemeanor, the evidence of two or three witnesses is required to sustain the charge. But if he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community; and if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a gentile or a tax collector. 'In truth I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 'In truth I tell you once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.'

Reflection

In the Gospel of today and of tomorrow we read and meditate on the second half of the Discourse of the Community. Today's Gospel speaks about fraternal correction (Mt 18: 15- 18) and of prayer in common (Mt 18: 19-20). The Gospel tomorrow speaks about pardon (Mt 18: 21-22) and presents the parable of pardon without limitations (Mt 18: 23-35). The key word in this second part is "to forgive." The accent is on reconciliation. In order that there may be reconciliation which will allow the little ones to return, it is important to know how to dialogue and to forgive, because the foundation of fraternity is the gratuitous love of God. It is only in this way that the community will be a sign of the Kingdom. It is not easy to forgive. There is a certain grief which continues to strike the heart as with a hammer. There are persons who say: "I forgive, but I do not forget!" There is: resentment, tensions, clashes, diverse opinions, and offences, provocations which render pardon and reconciliation difficult.

- The organization of the words of Jesus in the five Great Discourses of the Gospel of Matthew indicates that at the end of the first century, the communities had very concrete forms of catechesis. The Discourse of the Community (Mt 18: 1-35), for example gives updated instructions of how to proceed in case of any conflict among the members of the community and how to find criteria to solve the conflicts. Matthew gathers those phrases of Jesus which can help the communities of the end of the first century to overcome the two more acute problems which they had to face at that moment, that is, the exodus of the little ones because of the scandal given by some and the need to dialogue to overcome the rigor of others in accepting the little ones, the poor, in the community.
- Matthew 18: 15-18: Fraternal correction and the power to forgive. These verses give simple norms of how to proceed in case of conflicts in the community. If a brother or a sister should sin, if they had behavior not in accordance to the life of the community, they should not be denounced immediately. First, it is necessary to try to speak with them alone. Then it is necessary to try to know the reasons of the other. If no results are obtained, then it is necessary to take two or three persons of the community to see if it is possible to obtain some result. Only in extreme cases, it is necessary to expose the problem to the whole community. And if the person refuses to listen to the community, then they should be considered by you as "a sinner or a pagan," that is, as someone who is not part of the community. Therefore, it is not you who excludes, but it is the person himself/herself who excludes himself/herself. The community gathered only verifies or ratifies the exclusion. The grace to be able to forgive and to reconcile in the name of God was given to Peter (Mt 16: 19), to the Apostles (Jn 20: 23) and, here in the Discourse of the Community, to the community itself (Mt 18: 18). This reveals the importance of the decisions which the community assumes regarding its members.
- Matthew 18: 19: Prayer in common. The exclusion does not mean that the person is abandoned to his/her own fate. No! The person may be separated from the community but will never be separated from God. In the case in which the conversation in the community does not produce any result, and the person does

not want to be integrated in the life of the community, there still remains the last possibility to remain together with the Father to obtain reconciliation, and Jesus guarantees that the Father will listen: "If two of you agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in Heaven; for where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them."

- Matthew 18: 20: The presence of Jesus in the community. The reason of the certainty of being heard by the Father is the promise of Jesus: "Because where there are two or three who meet in my name, I am there among them!" Jesus is the center, the axis, of the community, and, as such, together with the Community, it will always be praying with us to the Father, in order that he may grant the gift of the return of the brother or the sister who have excluded themselves.

Personal Questions

- Why is it so difficult to forgive? In our community, is there some space for reconciliation? In what way can we reconcile?
- Jesus says: "For wherever there are two or three who meet in my name, I am also there among them." What does this mean for us today?

Concluding Prayer

Praise, servants of Yahweh, praise the name of Yahweh. Blessed be the name of Yahweh,
henceforth and forever. (Ps 113: 1-2)

Thursday, August 12, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, your Spirit made us your children, confident to call you Father.

Increase your Spirit within us and bring us to our promised inheritance.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 18: 21-19: 1

Then Peter went up to Jesus and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?'

Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.'

'And so the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet, with the words, "Be patient with me and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt.

Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow-servant who owed him one hundred *denarii*; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him, saying, "Pay what you owe me." His fellow-servant fell at his feet and appealed to him, saying, "Be patient with me and I will pay you." But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt.

His fellow-servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him.

Then the master sent for the man and said to him, "You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow-servant just as I had pity on you?" And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.'

Jesus had now finished what he wanted to say, and he left Galilee and came into the territory of Judea on the far side of the Jordan.

Reflection

In yesterday's Gospel we have heard the words of Jesus concerning fraternal correction (Mt 18: 15-20). In the Gospel today (Mt 19: 21-39) the central theme is pardon and reconciliation.

- Matthew 18: 21-22: Forgive seventy times seven! Before the words of Jesus on fraternal correction and reconciliation, Peter asks: "How often must I forgive? Seven times?" Seven is a number which indicates perfection and, in the case of the proposal of Peter, seven is synonymous of always. But Jesus goes beyond. He eliminates all and whatever possible limitation there may be to pardon: "Not seven I tell you, but seventy-seven times". It is as if he would say "Always, NO! Peter. But seventy times seven always!". And this because there is no proportion between God's love for us and our love for our brother. Here we recall the episode of the Old Testament of Lamech: "Lamech says to his wives, Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; listen to what I say: I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain, but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech" (Gen 4: 23-24). The task of the communities is to invert the process of the spiral of violence. To clarify his response to Peter, Jesus tells them the parable of pardon without limits.
- Matthew 18: 23-27: The attitude of the master. This parable is an allegory, that is, Jesus speaks about a master, but thinks of God. This explains the enormous contrasts of the parable. As we will see, in spite that it is a question of daily ordinary things, there

is something in this story which does not take place in daily life. In the story which Jesus tells, the master follows the norms of the law or rights of that time. It was his right to take a laborer with all his family and to keep him in prison until he would have paid his debt carrying out his work as a slave. But before the request of the debtor servant, the master forgives the debt. What strikes us is the amount: ten thousand talents! One talent was equal to 35 kg, and so according to the estimate made, ten thousand talents were equal to 350 tons of gold. Even if the debtor and his family would have worked their whole life, they would never have been capable to earn 350 tons of gold. The extreme estimate is made on purpose. Our debt before God is countless and unpayable!

- Matthew 18: 28-31: The attitude of the laborer. As soon as he went out, that servant found a fellow servant as himself who owned him one hundred *denarii* and, he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him saying: Pay what you owe! This servant owed him one hundred *denarii*; that is the salary of one hundred days of work. Some have estimated that it was a question of 30 grams of gold. There was no comparison between the two! But this makes us understand the attitude of the laborer: God forgives him 350 tons of gold and he is not capable to forgive 30 grams of gold. Instead of forgiving, he does to the companion what the master could have done with him but did not do it. He puts in prison his companion according to the norms of the law until he would have paid his debt. This is an inhuman attitude, which also strikes the other companions. Seeing what had happened, the other servants were sad and went to refer to their master everything which had happened. We also would have done the same; we would also have had the same attitude of disapproval.
- Matthew 18: 32-35: The attitude of God "Then the master called that man and said to him: "You wicked servant! I have forgiven you all your debt because you appealed to me. Were you not bound then to have pity on your fellow-servant just as I had pity on you? And, angry, the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt." Before God's love who pardons gratuitously our debt of 350 tons of gold, it is more than fair, than just that we should forgive our brother who has a small debt of 30 grams of gold. God's forgiveness is without any limit. The only limit for the gratuity of God's mercy comes from ourselves, from our incapacity to forgive our brothers! (Mt 18: 34). This is what we say and ask for in the Our Father: "Forgive us our offences as we forgive those who offend us" (Mt 6: 12-15).
- The community: an alternative space of solidarity and fraternity. The society of the Roman Empire was hard and heartless, without any space for the little ones. They sought some refuge for the heart and did not find it. The Synagogues were very demanding and did not offer a place for them. In the Christian communities, the rigor of some concerning the observance of the Law in the daily life followed the same criteria as society and as the Synagogue. Thus, in the communities, the same divisions which existed in society and in the Synagogue, between rich and poor, dominion and submission, man and woman, race, and religion, began to appear. The community instead of being a place of acceptance became a place of condemnation. By uniting the words of Jesus, Matthew wants to enlighten the

journey of the followers of Jesus, in order that the communities may be an alternative place of solidarity and of fraternity. They should be Good News for the poor.

Personal Questions

- To forgive. There are people who say: "I forgive but I do not forget!" And I? Am I capable to imitate God?
- Jesus gives us the example. At the time of death, he asks pardon for his murderers (Lk 13: 34). Am I capable to imitate Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

From the rising of the sun to its setting, praised be the name of Yahweh!

Supreme over all nations is Yahweh,

supreme over the heavens his glory. (Ps 113: 3-4)

Friday, August 13, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, your Spirit made us your children, confident to call you Father.

Increase your Spirit within us and bring us to our promised inheritance.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 19: 3-12

Some Pharisees approached Jesus, and to put him to the test they said, 'Is it against the Law for a man to divorce his wife on any pretext whatever?'

He answered, 'Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female and that he said: This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh? They are no longer two, therefore, but one flesh. So then, what God has united, human beings must not divide.'

They said to him, 'Then why did Moses command that a writ of dismissal should be given in cases of divorce?'

He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted, that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but it was not like this from the beginning. Now I say this to you:

anyone who divorces his wife -- I am not speaking of an illicit marriage -- and marries another, is guilty of adultery.'

The disciples said to him, 'If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is advisable not to marry.'

But he replied, 'It is not everyone who can accept what I have said, but only those to whom it is granted. There are eunuchs born so from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs made so by human agency and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'

Reflection

- Context. Up to Chapter 18 Matthew has shown how the discourses of Jesus have marked the different phases of the progressive constitution and formation of the community of disciples around their Master. Now in Chapter 19: 1 this small group withdraws from the territory of Galilee and arrives in the territories of Judaea. The call of Jesus that involves his disciples advances more until the decisive choice: the acceptance or rejection of the person of Jesus. Such a phase takes place along the road that leads to Jerusalem (Chapters 19-20), and finally with the arrival in the city and to the Temple (Chapters 21-23). All the encounters that Jesus experiences during these chapters take place along this journey from Galilee to Jerusalem.
- The encounter with the Pharisees. Passing through Trans-Jordanian (19: 1) the first encounter is with the Pharisees and the theme of the discussion of Jesus with them becomes a reason for reflection for the group of the disciples. The question of the Pharisees concerns divorce and places Jesus in difficulty, particularly, the more solid and stable reality for every Jewish community. The intervention of the Pharisees wants to accuse Jesus because of his teaching. It is a question of a true process: Matthew considers it as "testing him," "a way of tempting him." The question is really a crucial one: "Is it against the Law for a man to divorce his wife on any pretext whatsoever?" (19: 3). The awkward malicious attempt of the Pharisees to interpret the text of Dt 24: 1 to place Jesus in difficulty does not escape the attention of the reader: "Suppose a man has taken a wife and consummated the marriage, but she has not pleased him and he has found some impropriety of which to accuse her, he has, therefore, made out a writ of divorce for her and handed it to her and then dismissed her from his house". This text had given place, throughout the centuries, to innumerable discussions: to admit divorce for any reason whatsoever; to request a minimum of bad behavior, a true adultery.
- It is God who unites. Jesus responds to the Pharisees having recourse to Gn 1: 17: 2: 24, which presents the question about the primary will of God, the Creator. The love that unites man to woman, comes from God and because of its origin, it unifies and cannot be separated. If Jesus quotes Gn 2: 5), it is because he wants to underline a particular and absolute principle: it is the creating will of God that unites man and woman. When a man and a woman unite in marriage, it is God who unites them; the term "*coniugi*" - couple – comes from the verb joined together, to unite, that is to say,

that the joining together of the two partners sexually is the effect of the creative word of God. The response of Jesus to the Pharisees reaches its summit: marriage is indissoluble from its original constitution. Jesus continues this time drawing from Mt 2: 13-16: to repudiate the wife is to break the covenant with God and according to the prophets this covenant has to be lived, above all, by the spouses in their conjugal union (Ho 1-3; Is 1: 21-26; Jr 2: 2; 3: 1, 6-12; Ez 16; 23; Is 54: 6-10; 60-62). The response of Jesus appears as a contradiction to the Law of Moses which grants the possibility to grant a writ of divorce. To motivate his response Jesus reminds the Pharisees: if Moses gave this possibility, it is because you were so hardhearted (v. 8), more concrete, because of your indocility to the Word of God. The Law of Genesis 1: 26; 2: 24 had never been modified, but Moses was obliged to adapt it to an attitude of indocility. The first marriage was not annulled by adultery. To contemporary man and particularly, to the ecclesial community the word of Jesus clearly says that there should be no divorces; and, just the same, we see that there are; in pastoral life the divorced persons are accepted, to whom the possibility of entering into the Kingdom is always open. The reaction of the disciples is immediate: "If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is advisable not to marry" (v. 10). The response of Jesus continues to sustain the indissolubility of matrimony, impossible for the human mentality but possible for God. The eunuch of whom Jesus speaks is not the one who is unable to generate but the one, who separated from his wife, continues to live in continence, he remains faithful to the first conjugal bond: he is a eunuch as regards all other women.

Personal Questions

- As regards marriage do we know how to accept the teaching of Jesus with simplicity, without adapting it to our own legitimate choices to be comfortable?
- The evangelical passage has reminded us that the design of the Father on man and on woman is a wonderful project of love. Are you aware that love has an essential law: it implies the total and full gift of one's own person to the other?

Concluding Prayer

God, create in me a clean heart, renew within me a resolute spirit,
do not thrust me away from your presence,
do not take away from me your spirit of holiness. (Ps 51: 10-11)

Saturday, August 14, 2021

Opening Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God,

Your Spirit made us Your children, confident to call You Father.

Increase Your Spirit within us and bring us to our promised inheritance.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading – Matthew 19: 13-15

Children were brought to Jesus that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." After he placed his hands on them, he went away.

Reflection

The Gospel today is very brief: only three verses. The Gospel describes how Jesus accepts the children.

- Matthew 19: 13: The attitude of the disciples concerning the children. People brought little children to Jesus, for Him to lay His hands on them and pray. The disciples scolded the mothers. Why? Children were, as they were not long ago, kept to themselves. "Seen and not heard" as the saying goes. As has been said before, they were the insignificant of society. This was different than the laws of purity where it was important to avoid their getting close to Him and touching Him. It already had happened one time, when a leper touched Jesus. Jesus became unclean, impure and could no longer enter the city. He had to remain in deserted places (Mk 1: 4-45).
- Matthew 19: 14-15: Jesus' attitude: He accepts and defends the life of the children. Jesus reproved the disciples and said, "Let the little children alone, and do not stop them from coming to me, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs." Jesus does not care about transgressing the norms which prevent fraternity and acceptance to be given to the little ones. The new experience of God the Father has marked the life of Jesus and gives Him new eyes to perceive and to value the relationships among people. Jesus gets on the side of the little ones, of the excluded, and takes on their defense. It is impressive when we see everything which the Bible says regarding the attitudes of Jesus in defense of the life of the children, of the little ones:
 - To give thanks for the Kingdom present in the little ones. Jesus' joy is great when He sees that the children, the little ones, understand the things of the Kingdom which He announced to the people. "Father, I thank You!" (Mt 11:

25-26) Jesus recognizes that the little ones understand more about the things of the Kingdom than the doctors!

- To defend the right to shout or cry out. When Jesus entered the Temple, He upset the tables of the money changers, and the children were those who shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Mt 21: 15). Criticized by the high priests and the Scribes, Jesus defends them and in His defense He recalls the Scriptures (Mt 21: 16).
- To identify with the little ones. Jesus embraces the little ones and identifies Himself with them. Anyone who accepts a little one accepts Jesus (Mk 9: 37). "Insofar as you have done it to one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it to Me". (Mt 25: 40).
- To accept and not to scandalize. One of the hardest words of Jesus is against those who are a cause of scandal for the little ones, that is, who are the reason why the little ones no longer believe in God. Because of this, it would have been better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck (Lk 17: 1-2; Mt 18: 5-7). Jesus condemns the system, both the political one as well as the religious one, which causes the little ones, the humble people, to lose faith in God.
- To become like children. Jesus asks His disciples to become like children and to accept the Kingdom as children do. Without this, it is impossible to enter the Kingdom (Lk 9: 46-48). It indicates that the children are teachers of the adults. That was not normal. We are accustomed to the contrary.
- To accept and to touch. (Today's Gospel). The mothers with their children who get close to Jesus to ask Him to bless the children. The Apostles react and drive them away. Jesus corrects the adults and accepts the mothers with the children. He touches the children and embraces them. "Let the little children come to Me, and do not stop them!" (Mk 10: 13-16; Mt 19: 13-15).
- To accept and to take care. Many are the children and the young people whom He accepts, takes care of and raises from the dead: the twelve year-old daughter of Jairus, (Mk 5: 41-42), the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Mk 7: 29-30), the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7: 14-15), the epileptic child (Mk 9: 25-26), the son of the Centurion (Lk 7: 9-10), the son of the public officer (Jn 4: 50), the boy with five loaves of bread and two fishes (Jn 6: 9).

Personal Questions

- Children: what have you learned from children throughout the years of your life? And what do children learn about God, about Jesus and His life, from you?
- Which image of Jesus do I give to children? A severe God, a good God, a distant or absent God?

Concluding Prayer

Lord, give me back the joy of Your salvation, sustain in me a generous spirit.
I shall teach the wicked Your paths, and sinners will return to You. (Ps 51: 12-13)

Sunday, August 15, 2021

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

LECTIO

Opening Prayer:

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Wisdom, of Science, of Intelligence, of Counsel, fill us, we pray, with the knowledge of the Word of God, fill us with every kind of spiritual wisdom and intelligence, so as to be able to understand it at depth. May we, under your guidance be able to understand the Gospel of this Marian solemnity. Holy Spirit, we need you, you, the only one who continually molds in us the figure and the form of Jesus. And we turn to you, Mary, Mother of Jesus and of the Church, you who have lived the inebriating and totalizing Presence of the Holy Spirit, you who have experienced the power of his force in you, who has seen it operating in your Son Jesus from the time when he was in the maternal womb, open our heart and our mind, so that they may be docile to listen to the Word of God.

Reading of the Gospel – Luke 1: 39-56

Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could into the hill country to a town in Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now it happened that as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord? Look, the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'

And Mary said: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name, and his faithful love extends age after age to those who fear him.

He has used the power of his arm, he has routed the arrogant of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly. He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his faithful love-according to

the promise he made to our ancestors -- of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Mary stayed with her some three months and then went home.

Moments of Prayerful Silence:

Silence is a quality of the one who knows how to listen to God. Try to create in yourself an atmosphere of peace and of silent adoration. If you are capable to be in silence before God, you will be able to listen to his breath which is Life.

MEDITATIO

Key to the Reading:

Blessed are you among women

In the first part of today's Gospel, the words of Elizabeth resound: "Blessed are you among women," preceded by a geographical movement. Mary leaves Nazareth, situated in the north of Palestine, to go to the South, approximately fifty kilometers, to a place which tradition has identified as the present-day Ain Karem, not too far from Jerusalem. The physical movement shows the interior sensibility of Mary, who is not closed on herself, to contemplate, in a private and intimate way, the mystery of the Divine Maternity which is being accomplished in her, but she is projected to the path of charity. She changes locations to go and help her elderly cousin. Mary's going to Elizabeth has the added connotation 'in haste' which Saint Ambrose interprets as follows: "Mary set out in haste to the hill country, not because she did not believe the prophecy or because she was uncertain of the announcement or doubted of the proof, but because she was pleased with the promise and desirous to devotedly fulfill a service, with the impulse that she received from her intimate joy... The grace of the Holy Spirit does not entail slowness." The reader, though, knows that the true reason of the trip is not indicated, but can get it through information deduced from the context. The angel had communicated to Mary the pregnancy of Elizabeth, already in the sixth month (cfr. v. 37). Besides the fact that she remained there three months (cfr. v. 56), just the time so that the child could be born, allows us to understand that Mary intended to help her cousin. Mary runs, and goes where there is an urgent need, the need for help, showing, in this way, a clear sensibility and concrete availability.

Together with Mary, Jesus, in his mother's womb, moves with her. From here it is easy to deduce the Christological value of the episode of the visit of Mary to her cousin: above all, the attention is for Jesus. At first sight, it could seem to be a scene concentrated on the two women. But in reality, what is important for the Evangelist is the fact present in their conceiving. Mary moving tends, in last instance, to have the encounter between the two women.

As soon as Mary enters the house and greets Elizabeth, the unborn John leaped in her womb. According to some this leaping is not comparable to the changing place of the fetus, which is experienced by every pregnant woman. Luke uses a particular Greek verb which precisely means "jumping". Wishing to interpret the verb a bit literally, it could be indicated with "dancing," thus excluding a physical phenomenon only. Some

have proposed that this 'dance' could be considered as a form of 'homage' which John renders to Jesus, inaugurating, though not yet born, that attitude of respect and of subjection which will characterize his life: "After me is coming someone who is more powerful than me, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals" (Mk 1, 7). One day, John himself will give witness: "it is the bridegroom who has the bride; and yet the bridegroom's friend, who stands there and listens to him, is filled with joy at the bridegroom's voice. This is the joy that I feel, and it is complete. He must grow greater, I must grow less" (Jn 3, 29-30). Thus, Saint Ambrose comments: "Elizabeth was the first one to hear the voice, but John is first to perceive the grace." We find a confirmation of this interpretation in the words themselves of Elizabeth which, repeating the same Greek verb in v. 44. which was already employed in v. 41, says: "The child in my womb leapt for joy." Luke, with these details, has wished to evoke the prodigies which took place in the intimacy of Nazareth. It is only now, thanks to the dialogue with an interlocutor, the mystery of the divine maternity leaves aside its secrecy and its individual dimension, to become a notable fact, and object of appreciation and of praise.

The words of Elizabeth, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord?" (vv. 42-43). With a Semitic expression which is equivalent to a superlative ("among women"), the Evangelist wishes to attract the attention of the reader on the function of Mary: to be the "Mother of the Lord." And then, a blessing is reserved for her ("Blessed are you") and a blessed Beatitude. In what does this consist of? It expresses Mary's adherence to the Divine Will. Mary is not only the receiver of a mysterious design which makes her blessed, but also a person who knows how to accept and adhere to God's will. Mary is a creature who believes, because she trusts in a plain, simple word and which she has vested with her "yes" of love. And Elizabeth acknowledges this service of love, identifying her as "blessed as mother and blessed as believer."

In the meantime, John perceives the presence of his Lord and exults, expressing with that interior movement the joy which springs from that contact of salvation. Mary will be the interpreter of that event in the hymn of the Magnificat.

A Song of Love:

In this song Mary considers herself part of the *anawim*, of the "poor of God," of those who "fear God" placing in Him all their trust and hope and who, on the human level, do not enjoy any right or prestige. The spirituality of the *anawim* can be synthesized with the words of Psalm 37: 79: "In silence he is before God and hopes in him," because "those who hope in the Lord will possess the earth."

In Psalm 86: 6 the one who prays, turning to God, says: Give your servant your force": Here the term 'servant' expresses his being subjected, as well as the sentiment of belonging to God, of feeling secure with him.

The poor, in the strictly Biblical sense, are those who place their trust unconditionally in God; therefore they are to be considered, qualitatively, the best part, of the People of Israel.

The proud, instead, are those who place all their trust in themselves.

Now, according to the Magnificat, the poor have a thousand reasons to rejoice, because God glorifies the *anawim* (Psalm 149: 4) and humbles the proud. An image taken from the New Testament, which expresses very well the attitude of the poor of the Old Testament, is that of the publican who with humility beats his breast, while the pharisee being complacent of his merits is being consumed by his pride (Lk 19: 9-14). Definitely, Mary celebrates all that God has done in her and all that he works in every creature. Joy and gratitude characterize this hymn to salvation which recognizes the greatness of God, but which also makes great the one who sings it.

Some Question for Meditation:

- Is my prayer, above all, the expression of a sentiment or celebration and acknowledgement of God's action?
- Mary is presented as the believer in the Word of the Lord. How much time do I dedicate to listening to the Word of God?
- Is your prayer nourished from the Bible, as was that of Mary? Or rather am I dedicated to devotions which produce a continuous tasteless and dull prayer? Are you convinced that to return to Biblical prayer is the assurance to find a solid nourishment, chosen by Mary herself?
- Are you in the logics of the Magnificat which exalts the joy of giving, of losing to find, of accepting, the happiness of gratuity, of donation?

ORATIO

Psalm 44 (45)

The psalm, in this second part, glorifies the Queen. In today's liturgy these verses are applied to Mary and celebrate her greatness and beauty.

In your retinue are daughters of kings, the consort at your right hand in gold of Ophir. Listen, my daughter, attend to my words and hear; forget your own nation and your ancestral home, then the king will fall in love with your beauty; he is your lord, bow down before him.

Her companions are brought to her, they enter the king's palace with joy and rejoicing.

Final Prayer:

The prayer which follows is a brief meditation on the maternal role of Mary in the life of the believer: "Mary, woman who knows how to rejoice, who knows how to exult, who allows herself to be invaded by the full consolation of the Holy Spirit, teach us to pray so that we may also discover the source of joy. In Elizabeth's house, your cousin, feeling accepted and understood in your most intimate secret, you burst out in a hymn of exultation of the heart, speaking of God, of you about your relationship with him, and of the unprecedented adventure already begun of being the Mother of Christ and of all of us, holy people of God. Teach

us to give our prayer a rhythm of hope and tremors of joy, sometimes worn out by bitter whining and soaked with melancholy almost as obliged. The Gospel speaks to us about you, Mary, and of Elizabeth: both of you kept in your heart something, which you did not dare or you did not wish to manifest to anyone. But each one of you felt understood by the other on that prophetic day of the Visitation and you pronounced words of prayer and of feast. Your encounter becomes liturgy of thanksgiving and of praise to your ineffable God. You, woman of a profound joy, you sang the Magnificat, in rapture and amazed at all that the Lord was operating in his humble servant. Magnificat is the cry, the explosion of joy, which explodes within each one of us, when one feels accepted and understood”.

CONTEMPLATIO

The Virgin Mary, the temple of the Holy Spirit, accepted with faith the Word and surrendered herself completely to the power of Love. Because of this she became the Icon of interiority, that is all recollected under the look of God and abandoned to the power of the Most High. Mary keeps silence about herself, because everything in her can speak about the wonders of the Lord in her life.

Monday, August 16, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

God our Father,

may we love you in all things and above all things and reach the joy you have prepared for us beyond all our imagining.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 19: 16-22

A man came to Jesus and asked, 'Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said, 'Which ones?' Jesus replied, 'These: You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false witness. Honor your father and your mother. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?' Jesus said, 'If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

But when the young man heard these words, he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

Reflection

The Gospel today speaks to us about a young man who asks Jesus which is the way to eternal life. Jesus indicates to him the way of poverty. The young man does not accept the proposal of Jesus because he is very rich. A rich person is protected by the security of the riches which he possesses. He has difficulty to open himself to the loss of his security. Attached to the advantages of his goods, he lives to defend his own interests. A poor person does not have this concern. But there are some poor people who have the mentality of the rich. Many times, the desire for riches creates in them a great dependence and renders the poor, slaves of consumerism, because they seek riches everywhere. They no longer have time to dedicate themselves to the service of neighbor.

- Matthew 19: 16-19: The commandments and eternal life. A person approaches Jesus and asks him: "Master, what good deed should I do to possess eternal life?" Some manuscripts say that it was a young man. Jesus responds abruptly: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good!" Then he responds to the question and says: "If you wish to enter into life keep the commandments". The young rich man reacts and asks: "Which commandments?" Jesus very kindly enumerates the commandments which the young man already knew: "You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor father and mother, love your neighbor as yourself". The response of Jesus is very significant. The young man had asked what to do to obtain eternal life. He wanted to live close to God! But Jesus recalls only the commandments which refer to respect for the life close to others! He does not mention the first three commandments which define the relationship with God. According to Jesus, we will be well with God only if we are well with our neighbor. It is not worth it to deceive oneself. The door to reach God is our neighbor.
- In Mark, the question of the young man is different: "Good Master what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers: "Why do you call me good? No one is good, but God alone."
- (Mk 10: 17-18). Jesus deviates the attention from himself toward God, because what is important is to do God's will, to reveal the project of the Father.
- Matthew 19: 20: What does it serve to observe the commandments? The young man responds: "I have always observed all these things. What more do I need to do?" What follows is strange. The young man wanted to know the way which leads to eternal life. Now, the way of eternal life was and continues to be: to do God's will, expressed in the commandments. In other words, the young man observed the commandments without knowing for what purpose. If he had known it he would not have asked the question. It is like for many Catholics who do not know why they are Catholics. "I was born a Catholic and this is why I am Catholic!" It is as if was a custom!

- Matthew 19: 21-22: The proposal of Jesus and the response of the young man. Jesus answers: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; then come follow me". But on hearing these words the young man went away very sad because he was very rich. The observance of the commandments is only the first degree of a stairway that goes beyond, much farther and much higher. Jesus asks more! The observance of the commandments prepares the persons to be able to reach the point of giving oneself completely to the neighbor. Mark says that Jesus looked at the young man with love (Mk 10: 21). Jesus asks for much, but he asks for it with much love. The young man did not accept the proposal of Jesus and goes away, "because he was very rich".
- Jesus and the option for the poor. A two-fold slavery marked the situation of the people at the time of Jesus: the slavery of the politics of Herod, supported by the Roman Empire and maintained by a whole system which was well organized for exploitation and repression, and the slavery of the official religion, maintained by the religious authority of the time. For this reason, the clan, the families, the community, were disintegrating and the majority of the people were excluded, marginalized, homeless, without either a religion or a society. So, for this reason, there were diverse movements which, like Jesus, tried to build up life in the communities: Essens, Pharisees, and later on, the Zelots. But in the community of Jesus, there was something new which made it different from the other groups. There was the attitude concerning the poor and the excluded. The communities of the Pharisees lived separated. The word "Pharisee" meant "separated". This was the attitude concerning the poor and the excluded. The communities of the Pharisees lived separated from the impure people. Some Pharisees considered the people, ignorant and damned (Jn 7: 49), in sin (Jn 9: 34). They could learn nothing from the people (Jn 9,34). On the contrary, Jesus and his community lived amid persons who were excluded, considered impure; tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, lepers (Mt 2: 16; 1: 41; Lk 7: 37). Jesus recognizes the richness and the values which the poor possess (Mt 11: 25-26; Lk 21: 1-4). He proclaims them blessed, because the Kingdom is theirs, of the poor (Lk 6: 20; Mt 5: 3). He defines his mission in this way: "To announce the Good News to the poor" (Lk 4: 18). He himself lives poorly. He possesses nothing for himself, not even a stone where to recline his head (Lk 9: 58). And to anyone who wants to follow him, who wants to live like him, he orders that he choose either God or money! (Mt 6: 24). He orders to choose the poor, as he proposed it to the rich young man! (Mk 10: 21). This different way of accepting the poor and of living with them is a sign of the Kingdom of God.

Personal Questions

- Can a person who lives concerned about his wealth or with acquiring the goods which the propaganda of consumerism offers, free himself from all this in order to follow Jesus and live in peace in a Christian community? Is this possible? What do you think?
- What does it mean for us today: "Go, sell all you possess and give it to the poor?" Is it possible to do this concretely? Do you know anybody who has succeeded to do this for the Kingdom?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In grassy meadows he lets me lie.

By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name. (Ps 23: 1-3)

Tuesday, August 17, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

God our Father,

may we love you in all things and above all things and reach the joy you have prepared for us beyond all our imagining.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 19: 23-30

Jesus said to his disciples, 'In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.'

When the disciples heard this, they were astonished. 'Who can be saved, then?' they said. Jesus gazed at them. 'By human resources', he told them, 'This is impossible; for God everything is possible.'

Then Peter answered and said, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What are we to have, then?'

Jesus said to them, 'In truth I tell you, when everything is made new again and the Son of man is seated on his throne of glory, you yourselves will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters,

father, mother, children, or land for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times as much, and also inherit eternal life.

'Many who are first will be last, and the last, first.'

Reflection

The Gospel today is the immediate continuation of yesterday's Gospel. It gives the commentary of Jesus regarding the negative reaction of the young rich man.

- Matthew 19: 23-24: The camel and the eye of the needle. After the young man left, Jesus comments his decision and says: "In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven". Two observations concerning this affirmation of Jesus: a) the proverb of the camel and of the eye of the needle was used to say that something was impossible and unthinkable, humanly speaking. b) The expression "that someone rich enters the kingdom of Heaven," is a question, in the first place, not of entrance into Heaven after death, but of entering into the community around Jesus. And even now this is true. It is very difficult for the rich to enter and to feel at home in the communities which try to live the Gospel according to the demands of Jesus and which try to be open to the poor, the migrants, and to those excluded by society.
- Matthew 19: 25-26: The fear of the disciples. The young man had observed the commandments, but without understanding the reason for the observance. Something similar was happening with the disciples. When Jesus called them, they did the same thing which Jesus had asked the young man: they left everything and followed Jesus (Mt 4: 20, 22). But they were astonished at this affirmation of Jesus concerning the impossibility for someone rich to enter the Kingdom of God. This was a sign that they had not understood well the response which Jesus had given to the young rich man: "Go, sell all you possess, give it to the poor and then come and follow me!" Because if they had understood, they would not have remained so surprised by the requests of Jesus. When wealth or the desire for riches occupies the heart and the look, the person does not succeed to understand the sense of life and of the Gospel. God alone can help! "This is impossible for man, but for God all is possible!"
- Matthew 19: 27: The question of Peter. The background of the misunderstanding of the disciples appears in the question asked by Peter: "Look, we have left everything and have followed you. What are we to have then?" In spite of the beautiful generosity of abandoning everything, they still have the old mentality. They have abandoned everything to get something in exchange. They still had not understood well the sense of service and of gratuity.
- Matthew 19: 28-30: The response of Jesus. "In truth I tell you, when everything is made new again and the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory you yourselves will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or land for the sake of my name

will receive a hundred times as much and also inherit eternal life. Many, who are first, will be last, and the last, first". In this response, Jesus describes the new world, the foundation of which had been placed by his work and that of the disciples. Jesus stresses three important points: (a) The disciples will sit on twelve thrones next to Jesus to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (cfr. Rev 4: 4). (b) In exchange they will receive many things which they had abandoned: houses, brothers, sisters, mother, children land and will inherit eternal life. (c) The future world will be the reverse of the present world. There, the last ones will be the first ones and the first ones will be the last ones. The community around Jesus is the seed and the manifestation of this new world. Up until now the small community of the poor continues to be the seed and manifestation of the Kingdom.

Every time that in the history of the people of the Bible a new movement arises to renew the Covenant, it begins by re-establishing the rights of the poor, of the excluded. Without that, the Covenant will not be reconstructed. This is the sense and the reason for the insertion and the mission of the community of Jesus, in the midst of the poor. It draws from the roots, and it inaugurates the New Covenant.

Personal Questions

- To abandon houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, fields, for the sake of Jesus: how does this take place in your life? What have you already received in exchange?
- Today, most poor countries are not of a Christian religion, while the majority of the rich countries are. How can the saying be applied today that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle?

Concluding Prayer

Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger,
for you Lord, are at my side.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me. (Ps 23: 4)

Wednesday, August 18, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

God our Father,

may we love you in all things and above all things and reach the joy you have prepared for us beyond all our imagining.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 20: 1-16

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Now the kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one *denarius* a day and sent them to his vineyard.

Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace and said to them, "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage." So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more men standing around, and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You go into my vineyard too."

In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first." So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one *denarius* each. When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one *denarius* each. They took it, but grumbled at the landowner saying, "The men who came last have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat."

He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one *denarius*? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the last comer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?"

Thus the last will be first, and the first, last.'

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents a parable which is found only in Matthew's Gospel. It is not in the other Gospels. Like in all parables, Jesus tells a story about daily elements, daily things of the life of the people. He presents a picture of the social situation of his time, in which the auditors recognize themselves. But, at the same time, in the story of this parable, there are things which never take place in the reality of the life of the people.

And this, because speaking about the master, Jesus thinks about God, about his Father. And this is why in the story of the parable; the master does things which are surprising which never take place in the daily life of the auditors. But, in this strange attitude of the master, it is necessary to find the key to understand the message of the parable.

- Matthew 20: 1-7: The five times that the landowner goes out to look for laborers. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one *denarius* a day and sent them to his vineyard." This is how the story begins and it speaks for itself and does not need too many comments. In what follows, the landowner goes out four times to call other workers to go and work in his vineyard. Jesus refers to the terrible lack of work at that time. Now some details of the story: (a) the landowner himself goes out personally five times to contract workers. (b) When he contracts the workers, he fixes the salary only for the first group: one *denarius* a day. To those of nine o'clock in the morning he says: I will give you what is just, fair. With the others, he does not fix anything. He contracted them only to work in the vineyard. (c) At the end of the day, when it was the time to pay the workers, the landowners ordered the administrator to carry out this service.
- Matthew 20: 8-10: The strange way of fixing the accounts at the end of the day. When it was evening, the landowner of the vineyard told his administrator: Call the workers and pay them, beginning from the last ones to the first ones. Here, at the time of drawing the accounts, something strange takes place, which does not happen in normal life. It seems that things are inverted. The administrator begins to pay those who were contracted just an hour before. The salary is the same for all: one *denarius* as it was agreed with the first ones who were contracted at the beginning of the day. When the first came, they expected to get more but they too received one *denarius* each. Why does the landowner act like that? Would you do the same? It is precisely in this surprising gesture of the landowner that the key of understanding this parable is hidden.
- Matthew 20: 11-12: The normal reaction of the workers before the strange attitude of the landowner. The last ones also receive their salary as those who were contracted first. The story says that these began to grumble against the landowner and said: "The men who came last have done only one hour and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat." This is the normal reaction of a good sense. I think that all of us would have had the same reaction and would have said the same thing to the landowner. Would we have not?
- Matthew 20: 13-16: The surprising explanation of the landowner who gives the key of the parable. The response of the landowner is the following: "My friend, I am not being unjust to you. Did we not agree on one *denarius*? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the last comer as much as I pay you; have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?" These words give the key which explains the attitude of the landowner and indicates the message which Jesus wants to communicate to us: (a) The landowner was not unjust, because

he acts according to what he had agreed with the first group of workers: one *denarius* a day. (b) It is the sovereign decision of the landowner to give to the last ones the same amount that he had agreed upon with those of the first hour. These do not have the right to complain and claim anything. (c) Acting with justice, the landowner has the right to do the good that he wants with the things that belong to him. The worker, on his part has this same right. (d) The last question touches on the central point: Why should you be envious because I am generous? God is different and his thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55: 8-9).

The background of the parable is the circumstance of the time, for Jesus as well as for Matthew. The workers of the first hour are the Jewish People, called by God to work in his vineyard. They bear the weight of the day, from Abraham to Moses, for over one thousand years. Now at the eleventh hour, Jesus calls the pagans, the gentiles to work in his vineyard and they succeed in having the preference in the heart of God. "Thus the first ones will be last and the last will be first."

Personal Questions

- Those of the eleventh hour arrive, they have advantages and receive priority in regard to entrance into the Kingdom of God. When you wait in line for two hours, and a person arrives, and without saying anything she places herself before you. Would you accept this? Can these two situations be compared?
- God's action surpasses our calculations and our human way of acting. He surprises us and sometimes is uncomfortable. Has this happened to you in your life? What lessons have you drawn from this?

Concluding Prayer

Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.

I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come. (Ps 23: 6)

Thursday, August 19, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

God our Father,

may we love you in all things and above all things and reach the joy you have prepared for us beyond all our imagining.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 22: 1-14

Jesus began to speak to them in parables once again, 'The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a feast for his son's wedding. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited, but they would not come. Next he sent some more servants with the words, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, my banquet is all prepared, my oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, everything is ready. Come to the wedding." But they were not interested: one went off to his farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his servants, maltreated them and killed them. The king was furious. He dispatched his troops, destroyed those murderers and burnt their town. Then he said to his servants, "The wedding is ready; but as those who were invited proved to be unworthy, go to the main crossroads and invite everyone you can find to come to the wedding."

So these servants went out onto the roads and collected together everyone they could find, bad and good alike; and the wedding hall was filled with guests. When the king came in to look at the guests, he noticed one man who was not wearing a wedding garment, and said to him, "How did you get in here, my friend, without a wedding garment?" And the man was silent. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."

For many are invited but not all are chosen.'

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents the parable of the banquet which we also find in the Gospel of Matthew and of Luke, but with significant differences, which result from the point of view of each Evangelist. The background which leads both Evangelists to repeat this parable is the same. In the communities of the first Christians, both those of Matthew and those of Luke, the problem of living together between the converted Jews and the converted pagans, continued to be very alive. The Jews had ancient norms which prevented them from eating together with the pagans. Even entering into the Christian communities, many Jews kept the ancient custom of not sitting at the same table with the pagans. Thus, Peter had conflicts in the communities of Jerusalem because he had entered the house of Cornelius, a pagan, and for having eaten together with him (Ac 11: 3). This same problem existed, though in a diverse way, in the communities of Luke and of Matthew. In Luke's community, despite the difference in race, of class, and of gender, they had a great ideal of sharing and of communion (Act 2: 42; 4: 32; 5: 12). For this reason, in Luke's Gospel (Lk 14: 15-24), the parable insists on the invitation addressed to all. The master of the feast, angry and upset because the first guests, who were invited, did not arrive, sends his servants to call the poor, the cripple, the blind, and invites them to participate in the banquet. But there is still place. Then, the master of the feast orders that all be invited, until his house is full. In Matthew's Gospel, the first part of the parable, (Mt 22: 1-10) has the same objective as that of Luke's Gospel. It succeeds in saying that the master of the feast orders to let the "good and the bad" enter (Mt 22: 10). But at the end, he adds another parable (Mt 22: 11-14)

concerning the wedding garment, which insists on that which is specific of the Jews, the need of purity in order to be able to present oneself before God.

- Matthew 22: 1- 2: The invitation addressed to all. Some manuscripts say that the parable was told for the chief priests and for the elders of the People. This affirmation can serve even as a key for the reading, because it helps one to understand some strange points which appear in the story which Jesus is telling. The parable begins like this: "The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a feast for his son's wedding." This initial affirmation recalls the most profound hope: the desire of the people to be with God always. Several times the Gospel refers to this hope, suggesting that Jesus, the son of the King, is the bridegroom who comes to prepare the wedding (Mk 2: 19); Rev 21: 2; 19: 9).
- Matthew 22: 3-6: The invited guests do not want to come. The king invites in a more insisting way, but the guests do not want to come. "But they were not interested: one went off to his farm, another to his business; and the rest seized his servants, maltreated them and killed them." In Luke what prevents them from accepting the invitation are the duties of daily life. The first one says: "I have bought a piece of land and must go to see it." The second one: "I have bought five yoke of oxen and am on my way to try them out." The third one: "I have just got married and so am unable to come!" (cf. Lk 14: 18-20) According to the norms and customs of the time, those persons had the right and even the duty not to accept the invitation they had received (cf. Dt 20: 5-7).
- Matthew 22: 7: An incomprehensible war! The reaction of the king before the refusal is surprising. "Then the king was furious, and he dispatched his troops, destroyed those murderers and burnt their town." How is such a violent reaction to be interpreted? The parable was told for the chief priests and for the elders of the people (Mt 22: 1), for those responsible for the nations. Many times, Jesus had spoken to them about the need for conversion. He even shed tears over the city of Jerusalem and said: "If you too had only recognized on that day the way to peace! But in fact, it is hidden from your eyes. Yes, a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you, when they will encircle you and hem you in on every side; they will dash you and the children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing on another within you, because you did not recognize the moment of your visitation." (Lk 19: 41-44) The violent reaction of the king in the parable probably refers to the fact of the prevision of Jesus. Forty years later, Jerusalem was destroyed (Lk 19: 41-44; 21: 6).
- Matthew 22: 8-10: The banquet was not cancelled. For the third time, the king invites the people. He tells his servants: "The wedding banquet is ready, but those invited were unworthy; go to the main crossroads and invite everyone you can find to come to the wedding.

Going out on the streets, those servants collected together everyone they could find, bad and good alike; and the wedding hall was filled with guests." The bad who were excluded from participation in the worship with the Jews because they were considered impure, are now invited, specifically by the king to participate in the feast.

In the context of that time, the bad were the pagans. They also, are invited to participate in the wedding feast.

- Matthew 22: 11-14: The wedding garment. These verses tell us that the king went into the wedding hall and saw someone who was not wearing a wedding garment. And the king asked: "How did you get in here, my friend, without a wedding garment?" And he was silent. The story says that the man was bound hands and feet and thrown into the darkness outside. And the story concludes: "Many are invited but not all are chosen." Some scholars think that it is a question of a second parable which was added to lessen the impression which one has after the first parable, which speaks about "the good and the bad" who enter into the feast (Mt 22: 10). Even if one admits that it is not the observance of the Law which gives us salvation, but rather faith in the gratuitous love of God, that, in no way, diminishes the need for purity of heart as a condition to be able to appear before God.

Personal Questions

- Who are the persons who are normally invited to our feasts? Why? Who are the persons who are not invited to our feasts? Why?
- Which are the reasons which today prevent many persons from participation in society and in the Church? Which are some of the reasons that persons give to exclude themselves from the duty to participate in the community? Are those reasons just?

Concluding Prayer

Do not thrust me away from your presence,
do not take away from me your spirit of holiness.
Give me back the joy of your salvation,
sustain in me a generous spirit. (Ps 51: 11-12)

Friday, August 20, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

God our Father,
may we love you in all things and above all things and reach the joy you have prepared for us beyond all our imagining.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they got together and, to put him to the test, one of them put a further question, "Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?"

Jesus said to him, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the prophets too."

Reflection

- The text is enlightened. Jesus is in Jerusalem and precisely in the Temple where a process between he and his adversaries is taking place, the chief priests and the Scribes (20: 18; 21: 15), between the chief priests and the elders of the people (21: 23) and between the chief priests and the Pharisees (21: 45). The point of controversy of the debate is: the identity of Jesus or of the Son of David, the origin of his identity, and, therefore, the question regarding the nature of the Kingdom of God. The evangelist presents this plot of debates with a sequence of controversies that present a growing rhythm: the tribute to be paid to Caesar (22: 15-22), the resurrection of the dead (22: 23-33), the greatest commandment (22: 34-40), the Messiah, son and Lord of David (22: 41-46). The protagonists of the first three discussions are representatives of the official Judaism who try to place Jesus in difficulty on some crucial questions. These disputes are addressed to Jesus in so far as he is "Master" (Rabbi), this title tells the reader the understanding that the interlocutors have of Jesus. But Jesus takes this occasion to lead them to ask themselves a more crucial question: the last time they took position concerning his identity (22: 41-46).
- The greatest commandment. On the trail of the Sadducees who have preceded, the Pharisees ask Jesus a burning question: which is the greatest commandment? The Rabbis always first made evident the multiplicity of the prescriptions (248 commandments) the question is asked to Jesus regarding which is the fundamental precept. Just the same the Rabbis themselves had created a true survey to reduce them as far as possible: David lists eleven (Ps 15: 2-5), Isaiah six (Is 33: 15), Micah three (Mi 6: 8), Amos two (Am 5: 4) and Habakkuk only one (Hab 2: 4). But the intention of the Pharisees regarding their question, goes beyond every type of survey, it is a question of the essence itself of the prescriptions. Jesus, in answering binds together love of God and love of neighbor, so much so as to unite them in only one, but without renouncing to give priority to the first one, which subordinates, in a close way, the second one.

Thus, all the prescriptions of the Law, there were 613, are placed in relationship with this unique commandment: the whole Law finds its significance and foundation in the one of love. Jesus carries out a process of simplification of all the precepts of the Law: anyone who puts into practice the only commandment of love does not only

observe the Law, but also the prophets (v. 40). Just the same, the novelty of the response is not so much in the material content as in its realization: in Jesus, the love of God and love of neighbor have their own context, their last solidity. That is to say, that God's love and of neighbor, shown and realized in some way in his person, guides man to place himself before God and before others through love. The only commandment in two, God's love and love for neighbor, become the supporting column, not only of the Scriptures, but also of the life of the Christian.

Personal Questions

- Is love for God and for neighbor only a vague sentiment, an emotion, a passing motion or a reality that affirms your whole person: heart, will, intelligence and human relationships?
- You were created out of love. Are you aware that your fulfilment takes place in God's love, to love Him with the whole heart, with the whole soul, with the whole mind? Such a love demands a confirmation of charity toward the brothers and sisters and their situation of life. Do you practice this in daily life?

Concluding Prayer

Let them thank Yahweh for his faithful love, for his wonders for the children of Adam!

He has fed the hungry to their hearts' content, filled the starving with good things. (Ps 107: 8-9)

Saturday, August 21, 2021

Matthew 23: 1-12

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

You want us to live our faith not so much as a set of rules and practices but as a relationship from person to person with You and with people.

God, keep our hearts turned to You, that we may live what we believe and that we may express our love for You in terms of service to those around us, as Jesus did, Your Son, who lives with You and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.

Gospel Reading – Matthew 23: 1-12

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's

shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents the criticism of Jesus against the scribes and the Pharisees of His time. At the beginning of the missionary activity of Jesus, the doctors of Jerusalem went to Galilee to observe Him (Mk 3: 22; 7:1). Disturbed by Jesus' preaching, they had based their attacks on saying that He was possessed (Mk 3: 22). All along the three years the popularity of Jesus grew. And at the same time, the conflict between He and the religious authority also grew. The origin of this conflict was the way in which they placed themselves before God. The Pharisees sought their own security, not so much in God's love toward them, but rather in the rigorous observance of the Law. Before this mentality, Jesus insists on the practice of love which makes the observance of the law relative and gives it its true significance.

- Matthew 23: 1-3: The root or origin of the criticism: They say but they do not do. Jesus recognizes the authority of the scribes and of the Pharisees. They occupy the chair of Moses and teach the law of God, but they themselves do not observe what they teach. So Jesus tells them: You must, therefore, do and observe what they tell you, but do not do as they do, because they say but do not do! This is a terrible criticism! Immediately, as in a mirror, Jesus shows some aspects of the incoherence of the religious authority.
- Matthew 23: 4-7: Look in the mirror in order to make a revision of life. Jesus calls the attention of the disciples concerning the incoherent behavior of some doctors of the Law. In meditating on this incoherence, it is helpful to think about ourselves and not about the Pharisees and the scribes of that time already past. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will not lift a finger to move them; they do their works in order to be admired; they love to take the first places and to be called doctors. The scribes liked to enter into the houses of the widows and to recite long prayers to receive money in exchange! (Mk 12: 40).
- Matthew 23: 8-10): You are all brothers. Jesus orders that we have the contrary attitude. Instead of using the religion and the community as means for self-promotion in order to appear more important before others, He asks not to use the title of Rabbi or Teacher, of Master, Father and Guide because only one is the guide, Christ; only God in Heaven is Father, and Jesus is the Master, the Teacher. You are all brothers. This is the basis of the fraternity which comes from the certainty that God is our Father.

- Matthew 23: 11-12: The final summary: the greatest must be the servant. This phrase is what characterizes both the teaching and the behavior of Jesus: The greatest among you must be your servant; the one who raises himself up, will be humbled (cfr. Mk 10: 43; Lk 14: 11; 18: 14).

Personal Questions

- In what does Jesus criticize the Doctors of the Law and in what does He praise them?
- In what would He criticize me and in what would He praise me?

Concluding Prayer

'Honor to me is a sacrifice of thanksgiving; to the upright I will show God's salvation.' (Ps 50: 23)

Sunday, August 22, 2021

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord, your Word is sweet, it is like a honeycomb, it is not hard nor is it bitter. It may burn like fire, it may be like the hammer that breaks rock, it may be the sharp sword that pierces and separates the soul... but, Lord, your Word is sweet! Grant that I may listen to it that it may be gentle music, a song and an echo to my ears, my memory and my intellect. I offer my whole being to you and ask you to grant that I may listen faithfully, sincerely, strongly. Lord, grant that I may keep my ears and heart fixed on your lips, your voice, so that not one word may be in vain. Pour forth your Holy Spirit to be like living water watering my field so that it may bear fruit, thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. Lord, draw me, grant that I may come to you, because, you know... where shall I go, to whom on this earth if not to you?

Gospel Reading - John 6: 60-69

Placing the Passage in its Proper Context:

These are the concluding verses of the great chapter six of John's Gospel, where the Evangelist presents his "Eucharistic theology." This conclusion is the climax of the chapter, because the Word leads us deeper into and towards the center of things; from the crowd at the start of the chapter, to the Jews who discuss with Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum, to the disciples, to the twelve, even to Peter, the only one who stands for each one of us, alone, face to face with the Lord Jesus. Here we hear the reply to Jesus' teaching, to the Word sown abundantly in the heart of his listeners. Here we verify whether the soil of the heart produces thorns and weeds or green shoots that

produce ears and finally good corn in the ears.

An Aid to the Reading of the Passage:

- v. 60: Some disciples condemn the Word of the Lord and thus also Jesus himself who is the Word of God. God is not seen as a good Father who speaks to his children, but as a hard master (Mt 25: 24), with whom it is not possible to enter into dialogue.
- vv. 61-65: Jesus unveils the incredulity and hardness of heart of his disciples and reveals his mysteries of salvation: his ascension into heaven, the gift of the Holy Spirit and our participation in the divine life. But these mysteries can only be understood and accepted by the wisdom of a docile heart, capable of listening, and not by means of physical intelligence.
- v. 66: This verse reveals the first great betrayal by many disciples who have failed to understand the true teaching of Jesus. Instead of turning their gaze on the Master, they turn their backs on him and thus interrupt communion and no longer walk with him.
- vv. 67-69: Jesus now addresses himself to the twelve, his most intimate friends, and places before them a final and absolute choice, whether to stay with him or go away. Peter answers on behalf of all and proclaims the faith of the Church in Jesus as Son of God and in his Word, which is the true source of life.

The Text:

Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offence at this? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you that do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.

Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

A Moment of Silent Prayer

I have received the Gift, the grace, I have listened to the Word of the Lord, now I do not wish to murmur (v. 61), I do not wish to be scandalized (v. 61), nor do I wish to be confused by incredulity (v. 64). I do not wish to betray my Master (v. 64), I do not wish to withdraw and not walk with him any longer (v. 66)... I wish to remain with the Lord at all times! In the silence of my heart, I repeat endlessly to him: "Lord to whom shall I go if not to you??!". Behold, Lord, I come...

A Few Questions

to open my heart and plough my interior soil with a plough capable of pulling up the roots of hardness and incredulity.

- What kind of disciple am I? Am I really willing every day to learn at the school of Jesus, to receive his teaching, which is not the doctrine of human beings but the wisdom of the Holy Spirit?
- "This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?" Is it really the Word of the Lord that is hard or is it my heart that wants only to close itself and no longer listen?
- "Jesus knowing in himself..." He knows my heart and knows what is in each person (Jn 1:48; 2: 25; 4: 29; 10: 15). How do I react to his gaze, to his voice that calls my name, to his coming into my life, to his constant knocking (Ap 3: 20)? What choices do I make?
- "It is the Spirit that gives life." However, do I allow myself to be led like Mary (Lk 1: 38) and Simeon (Lk 2: 27), do I allow the Lord to take me where he wills, where he waits for me, or do I always want to decide for myself the direction of my life?
- Do I answer Jesus' personal invitation "Come to me! Come and follow me!" every day, every moment, in the most diverse situations of my life, in various circumstances, in the presence of others? To whom do I go? Where do I turn to? Whose footsteps am I following?

A Key to the Reading

I ask the Scriptures to be my guide, to enlighten each step, each movement, because I wish to go to Jesus. I ask the verbs he uses, the expressions he repeats, the silence of the unsaid words, to reveal to me the way ... to find him and not someone else.

- The Word of the Lord and the love relationship with it

In this passage, John presents to me the Word of the Lord as meeting point, the holy place for an appointment with Him. I realize that this is the place of my decision, of ever deeper separations in my heart and in my conscience. I realize also that the Word is a Person, it is the Lord himself, present before me, given to me, open to me. The whole of the Bible, page after page, is an invitation, sweet yet at the same time strong, to meet the Word, to get to know the Promised one, the Bride who is really the Word that comes from the kiss of love, from the mouth of the Lord. The meeting accorded is not superficial, empty, nor is it fleeting or sporadic, but intense, full, constant, uninterrupted, because it is like the meeting between the bride and groom. Thus does the Lord love me and give himself to me. It is, therefore, important to listen carefully and lovingly so that not one word may be in vain (1 Sam 3: 19); it is important to listen with the heart, with the soul (Ps 94: 8; Bar 2: 31); it is important to obey in practice for a lifetime (Mt 7: 24-27; Ja 1: 22-25); it is important to make a true

and final decision that will choose the Word of the Lord even to making it my sister (Pr 7: 1-4) or my bride to be taken into my home (Wis 8: 2).

- Murmuring is closing one's heart

The theme of murmuring, of rebelling, shakes me up and creates a crisis in me. When I read the Bible, even when I just think about it, I realize that murmuring against the Lord and his actions in our lives is the most terrible and destructive thing that could possibly live in my heart. It takes me away from Him. It separates me strongly and makes me blind, deaf, and insensitive. It makes me say that He does not exist while all the time He is very near; that He hates me when He loves me with an eternal and faithful love (Dt 1: 27)! It is the greatest and most profound foolishness! In Exodus, Numbers, and the Psalms, I come across a people of God that weeps, complains, gets angry, murmurs, closes itself, rebels, and turns away (Es 16: 7ff; Num 14: 2; 17, 20ff; Ps 105: 25); a hopeless, lifeless people. I understand that this kind of situation comes about when there is no longer dialogue with the Lord, when the contract with Him is broken, when, instead of listening to Him and asking questions of Him, there is only murmuring, a kind of continuous droning in the soul, in the mind, that makes me say: "Can God supply food in the dessert?" (Ps 77: 19). If I murmur against my Father, if I stop believing in his Love for me, in his tenderness, that He showers me with every good thing, I am lifeless, I am without nourishment for the every-day journey. Or if I get angry, if I become jealous because He is good and gives His love to all, without reserve, and I act like the Pharisees (Lk 15: 2; 19: 7), then I am entirely alone and besides no longer being His child I am no longer even brother or sister of anyone. In fact, there is a close relationship between murmuring against God and murmuring against brothers and sisters. (Phil 2: 14; 1 Pt 4: 9) I learn all this when I follow the trail of this word...

- The Gift of the Son of man: the Holy Spirit

It seems that I see a road full of light, traced by the Lord Jesus and almost hidden in these verses that are so compact and overflowing in spiritual richness. The starting point lies in a true and deep listening to his Words and in welcoming them. From here we pass on to the purification of the heart, which from a heart of stone, hard and closed, becomes, through the tenderness of the Father, a heart of flesh, soft, a heart that He can hurt, mould, take into His hands and hold tight, as a gift. Yes, all this is accomplished by the Words of Jesus when they come to me and enter into me. It is only thus that I can continue on my journey, overcoming murmurings and scandal, until I am able to see Jesus with new eyes, eyes renewed by the Word, eyes that do not rest on superficial things, on the hardness of the rind, but eyes that learn, every day a little more, to go beyond and to look on high. "Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?" (v. 62). This is the welcoming of the Spirit, gift of the Risen One, gift of the One who ascended at the right hand of the Father, gift from on high, perfect gift (Ja 1: 17). He had said: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me" (Jn 12: 32) and He draws me with the Spirit, He makes me His own with the Spirit, He sends me in the Spirit (Jn 20: 21s), He strengthens me thanks to the Spirit (Acts 1: 8). If I take a long look at the pages of the

Gospels, I can see how the Spirit of the Lord is the strength that dwells in each person, each reality, because He is the eternal love of the Father, the very life of God in us. I pay attention and dwell on the verbs and the expressions used, on the words that follow and enlighten each other, enriching each other. I feel that I am really immersed in living Waters that gush and gurgle, I feel that I receive a new baptism and I thank the Lord with my whole heart. "He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt 3: 11), so cries John and, as I read, this Word comes true in me, inside me, in my whole being. I feel the Spirit speaking in me (Mt 10: 20); who, with His power, drives away from me the spirit of evil (Mt 12: 28); who fills me, as He did Jesus (Lk 4:1), John the Baptist (Lk 1: 15), the Virgin Mary (Lk 1: 28. 35), Elisabeth (Lk 1: 41), Zachary (Lk 1: 67), Simeon (Lk 2: 26), the disciples (Acts 2: 4), Peter (Acts 4: 8) and so many others. I feel and meet the Spirit who teaches me what to say (Lk 12: 10); who really gives new birth to me so that I may never die (Jn 3: 5); who teaches me all things and reminds me of all that Jesus said (Jn 14: 26); who guides me towards truth (Jn 16: 13); who gives me strength to witness to the Lord Jesus (Acts 1: 8), to His love for me and for everyone.

- The struggle of faith: in the Father or in the evil one?

This passage of John's Gospel challenges us to a great struggle, a hand-to-hand fight between the spirit and the flesh, between the wisdom of God and human reason, between Jesus and the world. I can see that Job was right when he said that human life on earth is a time of temptation and a struggle (Job 7: 1), because I too experience the evil one who tries to discourage me by creating doubts concerning the divine promises and urging me to turn away from Jesus. He would like to send me away, tries by every means to harden my heart, to close me, to break my faith, my love. I hear him roaming around like a roaring lion seeking whom to devour (1 Pt 5: 8), like a tempter, a creator of divisions, an accuser, like a scoffer mocking and repeating all the time: "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Pt 3: 3f). I know that it is only with the arms of faith that I can win (Eph 6: 10-20; 2 Cor 10: 3-5), only in the strength that comes to me from the Words of my Father; hence I choose them, love them, study them, scrutinize them, learn them by heart, repeat them and say: "Even if a whole army surrounds me, I will not be afraid; even if enemies attack me, I will still trust in God!" (Ps 26: 3).

- Profession of faith in Jesus, Son of God

The appearance of Simon Peter at the end of this passage is like a pearl set on a precious jewel, because it is he who proclaims truth, light, and salvation through his profession of faith. I gather other passages from the Gospels, other professions of faith that help my incredulity, because I too wish to believe and then know, I too wish to believe and be firm (Is 7: 9): Mt 16: 16; Mk 8: 29; Lk 9: 20; Jn 11: 27).

A Moment of Silent Prayer:

Psalm 18: A Hymn of Praise to the Word of the Lord, Who Gives Wisdom and Joy to the Heart

The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

Ref. Lord, you have the words of eternal life!

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Ref. Lord, you have the words of eternal life!

But who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!

Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord,

my rock and my redeemer.

Ref. Lord, you have the words of eternal life!

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank you for your words that have re-awakened in me spirit and life; thank you because you speak and creation goes on, you overwhelm me, you still print your image in me, your unique likeness. Thank you because, lovingly and patiently, you wait for me even when I murmur, when I allow myself to be scandalized, when I fall into incredulity or when I turn my back to you. Forgive me, Lord, for all these faults and continue to heal me, to make me strong and happy in following you, you alone! Lord, you ascended to where you were before, but you are still with us and do not cease to draw each one of us to you. Draw me, Lord, and I shall run, because I have truly believed and known that you are the Holy One of God! But, please Lord, when I run to you, let me not run alone, let me be always open to the companionship of my brothers and sisters; and together with them, I shall find you and shall be your disciple all the days of my life. Amen.

Monday, August 23, 2021

Ordinary Time

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father, help us to seek the values that will bring us enduring joy in this changing world.

In our desire for what You promise make us one in mind and heart.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 23: 13-22

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the Kingdom of heaven before men. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves. "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If one swears by the temple, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gold of the temple, one is obligated.' Blind fools, which is greater, the gold, or the temple that made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If one swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gift on the altar, one is obligated.' You blind ones, which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? One who swears by the altar swears by it and all that is upon it; one who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it; one who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who is seated on it."

Reflection

During the next three days, we will meditate on the discourse in which Jesus criticizes the doctors of the law and the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites. In today's Gospel (Mt 23: 13-22), Jesus uses the expression "Alas for you..." (Mt 23: 23-26) four times, and in the Gospel of the day after tomorrow, He uses this same expression twice more (Mt 23: 27-32). These are condemnatory words, very hard words, against the religious leaders of the times. In pondering them, I should not only think of the doctors and the Pharisees of the time of Jesus, but also, and above all, of the hypocrisy found in me, in us, in our family, in the community, in our Church, in today's society. Let us look into the mirror of the text to discover the errors in ourselves.

- Matthew 23: 13: The first "Alas for you..." against those who close the door of the Kingdom because in this way you will not enter and, you do not even let those who want to enter. How do they lock people out of the Kingdom? They do it by presenting God as a severe judge, leaving very little space for the mercy of God; by imposing, in

the name of God, laws and norms which have nothing to do with the commandments of God, by presenting a false image of the Kingdom and by killing the desire to serve God and the Kingdom. A community which organizes itself around this false god “does not enter into the Kingdom,” and it is not even an expression of the Kingdom and prevents its members from entering into the Kingdom.

- Matthew 23: 14: The second “Alas for you...” is against those who use religion to enrich themselves. You devour the property of widows, though you make a show of lengthy prayers. The more severe will be the sentence you receive because of this.” Jesus allows the disciples to live the Gospel, because He says that the laborer has the right to his salary (Lk 10: 7; cf. 1 Cor 9: 13-14), but to use prayer and religion as a means to enrich themselves, that is hypocrisy and does not reveal the Good News of God. It transforms religion into a market. Jesus drives out the merchants from the Temple (Mk 11: 15-19) quoting the prophet Jeremiah: “My house will be called a House of Prayer for all people; but you have turned it into a bandits’ den!” (Mk 11: 17; cf. Isa 56: 7; Jer 7: 11). When Simon the magician wanted to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter curses him (Acts 8: 18-24). Simon received the “most severe condemnation” which Jesus speaks about in the Gospel today.
- Matthew 23: 15: The third expression of “Alas for you...” is against those who proselytize. “You travel over sea and land to make a single convert, and anyone who becomes one you make twice as fit for hell as you are.” There are people who become missionaries and proclaim the Gospel not to radiate the Good News, but to attract people for their group and their church. John once prohibited a person from using the name of Jesus because he was not part of His group. Jesus answered, “Do not stop him, because anyone who is not against us is for us (Mk 9: 39). The document of the Plenary Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America, which was held in March 2008 in Aparecida, Brazil, bears the title: “Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our people may have life in Him.” That is to say, the purpose of the mission is not to work in such a way that people become Catholic, but rather that people may have life, and life in abundance.
- Matthew 23: 16-22: The fourth “Alas for you...” is aimed at those who swear. “You say, ‘if anyone swears by the Temple, it has no force, but anyone who swears by the gold of the Temple is bound’. Jesus makes a long disquisition to show the flaws in so many oaths that people made or that the official religion ordered people to take: to swear by the gold of the Temple or by the offering which was on the altar. The teaching of Jesus given in the Sermon on the Mount is the best commentary on today’s Gospel: “But I tell you do not swear at all, either by heaven since that is God’s throne, or by earth, since that is His footstool, or by Jerusalem, since that is the city of the great King. Do not swear by your own head either, since you cannot turn a single hair white or black. All you need say is ‘Yes’ if you mean ‘yes,’ ‘No’ if you mean ‘no’; anything more than this comes from the Evil One” (Mt 5: 34-37).

Personal Questions

- “Alas for you...” is said four times: four reasons to receive severe criticism from Jesus. Which of these four criticisms refers to me?
- Does our Church today deserve these “Alas for you...” from Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

Sing a new song to Yahweh!

Sing to Yahweh, all the earth!

Sing to Yahweh, bless His name!

Proclaim His salvation day after day. (Ps 96: 1-2)

Tuesday, August 24, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

help us to seek the values that will bring us enduring joy in this changing world. In our desire for what you promise, make us one in mind and heart.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 45-51

The next day, Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.'

Nathanael said to him, 'From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?'

Philip replied, 'Come and see.'

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he said of him, 'There, truly, is an Israelite in whom there is no deception.' Nathanael asked, 'How do you know me?' Jesus replied, 'Before Philip came to call you, I saw you under the fig tree.' Nathanael answered, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel.' Jesus replied, 'You believe that just because I said: I saw you under the fig tree. You are going to see greater things than that.'

And then he added, 'In all truth I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man.'

Reflection

- Jesus returned to Galilee. He met Philip and called him telling him: "Follow me!" The purpose of the call is always the same: "to follow Jesus." The first Christians sought to preserve the names of the first disciples, and of some they even kept their family names and the name of their place of origin. Philip, Andrew, and Peter were from Bethsaida (Jn 1: 44). Nathanael was from Cana. Today many forget the names of the persons who were at the origin of their communities. To remember the names is a way of preserving the identity.
- Philip meets Nathanael and speaks to him about Jesus: "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth". Jesus is the one to whom all the history of the Old Testament refers.
- Nathanael asks: "From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?" Probably, even in his question there was some of the rivalry which existed among the small villages of the same region: Cana and Nazareth. Besides, according to the official teaching of the Scribes, the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, in Judah. He could not come from Nazareth in Galilee (Jn 7: 41-42). Andrew gives the same answer which Jesus had given to the other two disciples: "Come and see for yourself!" It is not by imposing, but rather by seeing that persons are convinced. Once again, the same way: to meet, to experience, to share, to witness, to lead toward Jesus!
- Jesus sees Nathanael and says: "Truly, he is an Israelite in whom there is no deception." He affirms that he already knew him when he was under the fig tree. How could Nathanael be an "authentic or true Israelite" if he did not accept Jesus as the Messiah? Nathanael "was under the fig tree". The fig tree was the symbol of Israel (cf. Mi 4: 4; Zc 3: 10; 1 Kg 5: 5). An authentic Israelite is the one who knows how to detach himself from his own ideas when he perceives that they are not in agreement with God's project. The Israelite who is not ready to bring about this conversion is neither authentic nor honest. Nathanael is authentic. He was waiting for the Messiah according to the official teaching of the time (Jn 7: 41-42, 52). This is why at the beginning he did not accept a Messiah coming from Nazareth. But the encounter with Jesus helped him to understand that God's project is not always as people imagine or desire that it be. He recognizes, acknowledges his deception or mistake, he changes his idea, accepts God as Messiah, and confesses: "Rabi, you are the Son of God: you are the King of Israel!" The confession of Nathanael is only at the beginning: The one who will be faithful will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man. He will experience that Jesus is the new bond of union between God and us, human beings. It is the dream of Jacob which has become a reality (Gen 28: 10-22).

Personal Questions

- Which is the title of Jesus that pleases you the most? Why?
- Have you had an intermediary between you and Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

Upright in all that he does,

Yahweh acts only in faithful love. (Ps 145: 17)

Wednesday, August 25, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

help us to seek the values that will bring us enduring joy in this changing world. In our desire for what you promise, make us one in mind and heart.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 23: 27-32

Jesus said: 'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs that look handsome on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of corruption. In just the same way, from the outside you look upright, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build the sepulchres of the prophets and decorate the tombs of the upright, saying, "We would never have joined in shedding the blood of the prophets, had we lived in our ancestors' day." So! Your own evidence tells against you! You are the children of those who murdered the prophets! Very well then, finish off the work that your ancestors began.

Reflection

These two last 'Alas for you...' which Jesus pronounced against the doctors of the law and the Pharisees of his time, take again and strengthen, the same theme of the two 'Alas for you...' of the Gospel of yesterday. Jesus criticizes the lack of coherence between the word and the practice, between what is interior and what is exterior.

- Matthew 23: 27-28: The seventh, "Alas for you..." against those who are like whitewashed tombs. You appear upright on the outside, but inside you are full of

hypocrisy and lawlessness". The image of "whitewashed sepulchres" speaks for itself and needs no commentaries. Jesus condemns those who have the fictitious appearance of upright persons, but who interiorly are the total negation of what they want to appear outside.

- Matthew 23: 29-32: The eighth "Alas for you..." against those who build the sepulchres of the prophets and decorate the tombs of the upright, but do not imitate them. The doctors and the Pharisees said: "We would never have joined in shedding the blood of the prophets, had we lived in our ancestors' day". And Jesus concludes saying: The persons who speak like this "confess that they are children of those who killed the prophets," then they say "Our fathers." And Jesus ends saying: "Very well then, finish off the work that your ancestors began!" In fact, at that moment they had already decided to kill Jesus. In this way they were finishing off the work of their ancestors.

Personal Questions

- Still two other expressions, 'Alas for you...' but two reasons for being criticized severely by Jesus. Which of these is in me?
- Which image of myself do I try to present to others? Does it correspond, in fact, to what I am before God?

Concluding Prayer

How blessed are all who fear Yahweh, who walk in his ways!

Your own labors will yield you a living, happy and prosperous will you be. (Ps 128: 1-2)

Thursday, August 26, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father,

help us to seek the values that will bring us enduring joy in this changing world. In our desire for what you promise make us one in mind and heart.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 24: 42-51

Jesus said to his disciples: 'So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be quite sure of this, that if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and

would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house. Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect. 'Who, then, is the wise and trustworthy servant whom the master placed over his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed that servant if his master's arrival finds him doing exactly that. In truth I tell you, he will put him in charge of everything he owns. But if the servant is dishonest and says to himself, "My master is taking his time," and sets about beating his fellow-servants and eating and drinking with drunkards, his master will come on a day he does not expect and at an hour he does not know. The master will cut him off and send him to the same fate as the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.'

Reflection

The Gospel today speaks about the coming of the Lord at the end of time and exhorts us to be watchful, to watch. At the time of the first Christians, many persons thought that the end of this world was close at hand and that Jesus would have returned afterwards. Today many persons think that the end of the world is close at hand. Therefore, it is well to reflect on the meaning of vigilance, of watching.

- Matthew 24: 42: Watch. "So stay awake! Watch, because you do not know the day when your master is coming". Concerning the day and the hour of the end of the world, Jesus had said: "But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, no one but the Father!" (Mk 13: 32). Today, many people live concerned thinking about the end of the world. Have you seen when walking through the streets of the city that it is written on the walls: "Jesus will return!" And how will this coming be? After the year 1000, basing themselves on the Gospel of John, people began to say (Rev 20: 7): "1000 years have gone by, but 2000 will not pass by!" This is why, as the year 2000 approached, many were worried. There were even some people who were anguished because of the proximity of the end of the world, so much so that they committed suicide. Others, reading the Apocalypse of John, even were able to foretell the exact hour of the end. But the year 2000 came and nothing happened. The end of the world does not arrive! Many times, the affirmation "Jesus will return" is used to frighten people and oblige them to belong to a given church! Others, because they have waited so long and have speculated so much concerning the coming of Jesus, are not aware of his presence among us, in the most common things of life, in the facts of every day.
- The same problems existed in the Christian communities of the first centuries. Many persons of the communities said that the end of this world was close at hand and that Jesus would have returned. Some of the community of Thessalonica in Greece, basing themselves on the preaching of Paul said: "Jesus will return!" (1 Th 4: 13-18; 2 Th 2: 2). Therefore, there were even persons who no longer worked because they thought that the coming of the end was so close at hand, within a few days or a few weeks so, "Why work, if Jesus will return afterwards?" (cf. 2 Th 3: 11). Paul responds that it was not so simple as they imagined. To those who had stopped working he would say: "Anyone who does not want to work, has no right to eat!"

Others remained looking up at the sky, waiting for the return of Jesus in the clouds (cf. Ac 1: 11). Others rebelled because he delayed coming back (2 Pt 3: 4-9). In general, the Christians lived with the expectation of the imminent coming of Jesus. Jesus was coming to realize or carry out the Final Judgement to end with the unjust history of this world and to inaugurate the new phase of history, the definitive phase of the New Heaven and the New Earth. They believed that this would have taken place within one or two generations. Many persons would still be alive when Jesus would have appeared again, glorious in Heaven (1 Th 4: 16-17; Mk 9: 1). Others, tired of waiting would say: "He will never come back!" (2 P 3,).

- Up until now the coming of Jesus has not arrived! How can this delay be understood? It is because they are not aware that Jesus has already returned and lives in our midst: "I am with you always, till the end of time." (Mt 28: 20). He is already at our side, in the struggle for justice, for peace, for life. The fullness has not as yet been attained, but a guarantee of the Kingdom is already in our midst. This is why, we expect with a firm hope the full liberation of humanity and of nature (Rm 8: 22-25). While we wait and struggle, we say with certainty: "He is already in our midst" (Mt 25: 40).
- Matthew 24: 43-51: The example of the householder and of his servants. "Consider this: if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house."

Jesus says this very clearly. Nobody knows anything regarding the hour: "Concerning this day and this hour, nobody knows anything, neither the angels, or the Son, but only the Father. What is important is not to know the hour of the end of this world, but rather to be capable to perceive the coming of Jesus who is already present in our midst in the person of the poor (cf. Mt 25: 40) and in so many other ways and events of our daily life. What is important is to open the eyes and to keep in mind the commitment of the good servant of whom Jesus speaks about in the parable.

Personal Questions

- On which signs do people base themselves to say that the end of the world is close at hand? Do you believe that the end of the world is close at hand?
- What can we respond to those who say that the end of the world is close at hand? Which is the force which impels you to resist and to have hope?

Concluding Prayer

Day after day I shall bless you, Lord,

I shall praise your name for ever and ever. Great is Yahweh and worthy of all praise,
his greatness beyond all reckoning. (Ps 145: 2-3)

Friday, August 27, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of everlasting goodness, our origin and guide, be close to us and hear the prayers of all who praise you. Forgive our sins and restore us to life. Keep us safe in your love.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading – Matthew 25: 1-13

Jesus said to his disciples: "Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like this: Ten wedding attendants took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were sensible: the foolish ones, though they took their lamps, took no oil with them, whereas the sensible ones took flasks of oil as well as their lamps. The bridegroom was late, and they all grew drowsy and fell asleep. But at midnight there was a cry, "Look! The bridegroom! Go out and meet him". Then all those wedding attendants woke up and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish ones said to the sensible ones, "give us some of your oil: our lamps are going out." But they replied, "There may not be enough for us and for you; you had better go to those who sell it and buy some for yourselves." They had gone off to buy it when the bridegroom arrived. Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding hall and the door was closed. The other attendants arrived later. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us." But He replied, "In truth I tell you I do not know you." So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour.

Reflection

Today is the Feast of Saint Edith Stein who in Carmel took the name of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. For this reason, the Gospel today narrates the parable of the ten virgins who had to welcome the bridegroom when he arrived at the wedding.

- Matthew 25: 1^a: The beginning: "At that time." The parable begins with these two words: "At that time." It is a question of the coming of the Son of Man (cfr. Mt 24: 37). Nobody knows when this day, this time will come, "not even the angels in Heaven nor the Son himself, but only the Father." (Mt 24: 36) The fortune tellers will not succeed in giving an estimate. The Son of Man will come as a surprise, when people less expect him (Mt 24: 44). It can be today, it can be tomorrow, that is why the last warning of the parable of the ten Virgins is: "Keep watch!" The ten girls should be prepared for anything which may happen. When the Nazi Policemen knocked at the door of the Monastery of the Carmelite Sisters of Echt in the Province of Limburg, in the Netherlands, Edith Stein, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, was prepared. She

took on the Cross and followed the way to martyrdom in the extermination camp out of love for God and for her people. She was one of the prudent virgins of the parable.

- Matthew 25: 1b-4: The ten virgins ready to wait for the bridegroom. The parable begins like this: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this: ten wedding attendants took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." It is a question of the girls who accompany the bridegroom to the wedding feast. Because of this, they must take the lamps with them, to light the way, and also to render the feast more joyful with more light. Five of them were prudent and five were foolish. This difference is seen in the way in which they prepare themselves for the role that they must carry out. Together with the lighted lamps, the prudent ones had taken some oil in reserve, preparing themselves in this way for anything which could happen. The foolish ones took only the lamps, and they did not think to take some oil in reserve with them.
- Matthew 25: 5-7: The unforeseen delay of the arrival of the bridegroom. The bridegroom was late. He had not precisely indicated the hour of his arrival. While waiting the attendants went to sleep. But the lamps continue to burn and use the oil until gradually they turned off. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, there was a cry: "Look! The bridegroom! Go out and meet him!" All the attendants woke up and began to prepare their lamps which were burning out. They had to put in some of the oil they had brought in reserve so that the lamps would not burn out.
- Matthew 25: 8-9: The different reactions before the delay of the bridegroom. It is only now that the foolish attendants become aware that they should have brought some oil in reserve with them. They went to ask the prudent ones: "Give us some of your oil, our lamps are going out". The prudent ones could not respond to this request, because at that moment what was important was not for the prudent ones to share their oil with the foolish ones, but that they would be ready to accompany the bridegroom to the place of the feast. For this reason, they advised them: "You had better go to those who sell it and buy some for yourselves".
- Matthew 25: 10-12: The fate of the prudent attendants and that of the foolish ones. The foolish ones followed the advice of the prudent ones and went to buy some oil. During their brief absence the bridegroom arrived, and the prudent ones were able to accompany him and to enter together with him to the wedding feast. But the door was closed behind them. When the others arrived, they knocked at the door and said: "Lord, Lord, open the door for us!" and they received the response: "In truth I tell you, I do not know you."
- Matthew 25: 13: The final recommendation of Jesus for all of us. The story of this parable is very simple, and the lesson is evident: "So stay awake and watch, because you do not know either the day or the hour." The moral of the story: do not be superficial, look beyond the present moment, and try to discover the call of God even in the smallest things of life, even the oil which may be lacking in the small light or lamp.

Personal Questions

- Has it happened to you sometimes in your life to think about having oil in reserve for your lamp?
- Do you know the life of Saint Edith Stein, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross?

Concluding Prayer

I will bless Yahweh at all times, his praise continually on my lips.

I will praise Yahweh from my heart;

let the humble hear and rejoice. (Ps 34: 1-2)

Saturday, August 28, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father, help us to seek the values that will bring us enduring joy in this changing world.

In our desire for what You promise make us one in mind and heart.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 25: 14-30

Jesus told his disciples this parable: "A man going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one— to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.

The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew

you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.' His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return? Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten.

For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'"

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents to us the parable of the talents. This parable was between two other parables: the parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25: 1-13) and the parable of the final judgment (Mt 25: 31-46). These three parables clarify and orientate people concerning the coming of the Kingdom. The parable of the ten virgins insists on vigilance: the Kingdom may arrive at any moment. The parable of the final judgment says that in order to possess the Kingdom it is necessary to accept the little ones. The parable of the talents directs us on what to do to make the Kingdom grow. It speaks of the gifts and the charisms which people receive from God. Every person has qualities, knows something that he/she can teach others. Nobody is just a pupil; nobody is just a teacher. We all learn from one another.

A key to understanding the parable: one of the things which has greater influence on the life of the people is the idea which we have of God. Among the Jews who followed the Pharisees, some imagined that God was a severe judge, who treated people according to the merit they had gained through the observance of the Law. That produced fear in the people and prevented them from growing. It especially prevented them from opening a space within them, to receive and accept the new experience of God which Jesus communicated. In order to help these people, Matthew tells the story of the talents.

- Matthew 25: 14-15: The door of entrance in the parable. Jesus tells the story of a man who, before going abroad, entrusted his goods to his servants, giving them five, two and one talent, according to the capacity of each one. One talent was equal to 34 kg. of gold, which is not something small! Basically, each one receives the same amount because he receives "according to his capacity." Anyone who has a big cup, receives a full cup. The man went on his journey abroad, where he remained for a long time. The story produces a certain moment of suspense. One does not know for what purpose the man entrusts his money to the servants; neither does one know the end.
- Matthew 25: 16-18: The way of acting of each one of the servants. The first two servants worked and made the money produce a double amount. But the one who received one talent buried it so as not to lose it. It is a question of the goods of the Kingdom, which are given to people and to the communities according to their capacity. Everyone receives some good of the Kingdom, but not all respond in the same way!

- Matthew 25: 19-23: Rendering an account of the first and the second servants, and response of the master. After a long time, the man returned. The first two servants say the same thing: "Sir, you entrusted me with five/two talents, here are five/two more that I have made." And the master gives the same response: "Well done, good and trustworthy servant, you have shown you are trustworthy in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness."
- Matthew 25: 24-25: Rendering of account of the third servant. The third servant comes and says, "Sir, I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you had not sown and gathering where you had not scattered, so I was afraid and I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here it is!" In this phrase we have a mistaken idea of God, which is criticized by Jesus. The servant considers God as a severe master. Before such a God, the human being is afraid and hides behind the exact and narrow-minded observance of the Law. The person thinks that acting in this way, the severity of the legislator will not punish him. In reality, such a person has a flawed view of God, and believes only in self and in the observance of the Law. This person closes up in self, separates herself from God and cannot be concerned about others. This person becomes incapable of growing and developing as a free person. This false image of God isolates the human being, kills the community, puts an end to joy and impoverishes life.
- Matthew 25: 26-27: The response of the Master to the third servant. The response of the master is ironic. He says, "Wicked and lazy servant! So you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered; you should have deposited my money with the bankers and on my return I would have got my money back with interest!" The third servant was not consistent with the severe image which he had of God. If he imagined that God was severe, he should have, at least, placed the money in the bank. Then, he is condemned not by God but by the mistaken idea that he had of God and which makes him more immature and fearful than what he should have been. It was not possible for him to be consistent with the erroneous image which he had of God, because fear dehumanized and paralyzed life.
- Matthew 25: 28-30: The last word of the Lord, which clarifies the parable. The master orders that the talent be taken from him and given to the man who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but anyone who has not, will be deprived even of what he has." This is the key which clarifies everything. In reality, the talents, the "money of the master," the goods of the Kingdom, are love, service, sharing. It is everything which helps the community to grow and reveals the presence of God. Anyone who closes himself in self out of fear of losing the little that he has, at the end will lose even the little that he has. But the person who does not think of self, and gives herself to others, grows and receives in turn, in an unexpected way, everything which she has given and even more. Anyone who loses his life will find it, and anyone who has the courage to lose his life will find it."
- The different money of the Kingdom. There is no difference between those who have received more and those who have received less. All have their gift according to their

capacity. What is important is that this gift be placed at the service of the Kingdom and make the goods of the Kingdom grow. These gifts are love, fraternal spirit, sharing. The principal key of the parable does not consist in making the talents render something, but rather in relating to God in a correct way. The two first servants ask for nothing; they do not seek their own good; they do not want things for themselves; they do not close up in self; they do not calculate. In the most natural way, almost without being aware and without seeking their own merit, they begin to work, in such a way that the gift received from God may produce for God and for the Kingdom. The third servant is afraid, and because of this does nothing. According to the norms of the ancient law, he acts correctly. He fulfills the requirements. He loses nothing and gains nothing. And because of this he loses even what he had. The Kingdom is a risk. Anyone who does not want to run risks will lose the Kingdom!

Personal Questions

- In our community, do we try to know and value the gifts of each person? Is our community a place where people are able to make known their talents and make them available to others? Sometimes, the gifts of some generate envy and competitiveness in others. How do we react?
- How is the following statement to be understood: "For anyone who has will be given more; but anyone who does not have will be taken away even what he has"?

Concluding Prayer

We are waiting for Yahweh;
He is our help and our shield,
for in Him our heart rejoices,
in His holy name we trust. (Ps 33: 20-21)

Sunday, August 29, 2021

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word

guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, Son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

A Key to the Reading:

- The Gospel of the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time describes the religious customs of Jesus' time, speaks of the Pharisees who taught the people these practices and customs and of Jesus' teaching concerning this matter. Many of these practices and customs had lost their meaning and made peoples' lives difficult. The Pharisees saw sin in everything and threatened with punishment in hell! For instance, to eat without washing one's hands was considered a sin. But these practices and customs continued to be passed down and taught from fear or from superstition. Do you know of any present religious practice that has lost its meaning, but which is still being taught? In our reading of the text we shall try to look at Jesus' attitude concerning what he says about the Pharisees and what he teaches concerning the religious practices taught by the Pharisees.
- The text of this Sunday's liturgy presents some verses and leaves out other verses to shorten the text and make it more understandable. For the sake of completeness, we use the whole text and offer comments also on the verses omitted from the liturgy. The parts omitted in the liturgy are in italics.

A Division of the Text to Help with the Reading:

- Mark 7: 1-2: The attack of the Pharisees and the freedom of the disciples
- Mark 7: 3-4: Mark's explanation of the Tradition of the Elders
- Mark 7: 5: The Scribes and Pharisees criticize the behavior of the disciples of Jesus
- Mark 7: 6-8: Jesus' strong reply concerning the incoherence of the Pharisees
- Mark 7: 9-13: A concrete example of how the Pharisees empty God's commandment of any meaning
- Mark 7: 14-16: Jesus' explanation to the people: a new way to God
- Mark 7: 17-23: Jesus' explanation to his disciples

Text:

¹ The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round him, ² and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. ³ For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, keep the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; ⁴ and on returning from the marketplace they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them to keep, concerning

the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. ⁵ So the Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' ⁶ He answered, 'How rightly Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites in the passage of scripture: This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. ⁷ Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments. ⁸ You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions.' ⁹ And he said to them, *'How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition!'* ¹⁰ For Moses said: Honor your father and your mother, and, Anyone who curses father or mother must be put to death. ¹¹ But you say, "If a man says to his father or mother: Anything I have that I might have used to help you is Korban (that is, dedicated to God)," ¹² then he is forbidden from that moment to do anything for his father or mother. ¹³ In this way you make God's word ineffective for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this.' ¹⁴ He called the people to him again and said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand. ¹⁵ Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean. ¹⁶ Anyone who has ears for listening should listen!' ¹⁷ When he had gone into the house, away from the crowd, his disciples questioned him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, 'Even you -- don't you understand? Can't you see that nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean, ¹⁹ because it goes not into the heart but into the stomach and passes into the sewer?' (Thus he pronounced all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he went on, 'It is what comes out of someone that makes that person unclean.' ²¹ For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within and make a person unclean.'

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What pleased or touched you most in this text? Why?
- According to the text, what were the practices that the Pharisees taught the people? In what does Jesus criticize the Pharisees?
- In this text, what is the new way that Jesus shows the people to reach God?
- In the name of the "tradition of the elders" they do not observe the Commandment of God. Does this happen today? Where? When?
- The Pharisees were practicing Jews, but their faith was divorced from the lives of the people. Jesus criticizes them for this. Would Jesus criticize us today? Why?

Deeper into the theme

The Context of Then and of Today:

- In this Lectio let us take a close look at Jesus' attitude concerning the question of purity. Mark had already mentioned this matter. In Mk 1: 23-28, Jesus drives an impure devil away. In Mk 1: 40-45, he heals a leper. In Mk 5: 25-34, he heals a woman considered impure. On many other occasions, Jesus touches those physically sick without fear of becoming impure. Here, in chapter 7, Jesus helps people and his disciples to deepen the idea of purity and the laws on purity.
- For centuries, for the Jews not to contract impurity, contact with pagans and eating with them was forbidden. In the 70's, when Mark was writing his Gospel, some converted Jews said: "Now that we are Christians, we must leave behind old practices that keep us apart from converted pagans!" But other converted Jews thought they had to continue to observe the laws concerning purity. Jesus' attitude, as described in today's Gospel, helps to overcome this problem.

A Commentary on the Text:

- Mark 7: 1-2: The control of the Pharisees and the freedom of the disciples
The Pharisees and some Scribes who were in Jerusalem, watch Jesus' disciples eating bread with impure hands. There are three points worth noting: (i) The Scribes are from Jerusalem, the capital! This means that they had come to observe and control Jesus' steps. (ii) The disciples do not wash their hands before eating! This means that their living with Jesus gives them the courage to transgress the norms imposed by tradition and that they had a feeling for life. (iii) The practice of washing hands, which to this day is an important hygienic matter, had acquired a religious meaning that served to control and discriminate against persons.
- Mark 7: 3-4: Mark's explanation concerning the tradition of the elders
"The tradition of the elders" passed on the norms to be observed by people so as to achieve the purity required by law. The observance of purity was considered a very serious matter. They thought that an impure person could not receive the blessing promised by God to Abraham. The norms concerning purity were taught in such a way that when people observed them, they could follow the road to God, source of peace. However, rather than being a source of peace, these norms were chains, a form of slavery. It was practically impossible for the poor to observe these norms and laws. Thus, the poor were despised and considered ignorant and cursed people who did not know the law (Jn 7: 49).
- Mark 7: 5: The Scribes and Pharisees criticize the behavior of Jesus' disciples
The Scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus: Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands? They pretend to be interested in knowing the reason for the behavior of the disciples. In fact, they are criticizing Jesus for allowing his disciples to transgress the norms concerning purity. The

scribes and doctors of the law were the guardians of doctrine. They dedicated their lives to the study of the Law of God and taught people how to observe completely the Law of God, especially the norms concerning purity. The Pharisees were a kind of fraternity, whose main preoccupation was to observe all the laws concerning purity. The word Pharisee means set apart. They endeavored so that, by the perfect observance of the laws concerning purity, people would become pure, set apart and holy as the Laws of the Tradition required! Because of the exemplary witness of their lives in following the laws of the times, they wielded great authority in the villages of Galilee.

- Mark 7: 6-8: Jesus' strong reply concerning the Pharisees' lack of coherence

Jesus replies quoting Isaiah: This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments. You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions (Is 29: 13). Because, by insisting on the norms concerning purity, the Pharisees had emptied the commandments of the law of God of all coherence. Jesus immediately gives a concrete example of how they render the commandment of God insignificant.

- Mark 7: 9-13: A concrete example of how the Pharisees render the commandment of God incoherent

The "tradition of the elders" taught: a son who dedicates his possessions to the Temple, may not use these possessions to help his parents in need. Thus, in the name of tradition, they rendered incoherent the fourth commandment to love father and mother. There still are such people today. They seem to be observant, but only externally. Internally, their heart is far from God! As one of our hymns says: "His name is Jesus Christ and he is hungry, he lives by the side of the road. And when people see him, they move on to get to church quickly!" In Jesus' days, people, in their wisdom, did not agree with all that they were taught. They hoped that one day the Messiah would come to show them some other way to be pure. This hope comes to pass in Jesus.

- Mark 7: 14-16: Jesus explains to the people: a new way to reach God

Jesus says to the crowd: "Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean!" (Mk 7: 15). Jesus reverses things: that which is impure does not come from the outside to the inside, as the doctors of the law taught, but from the inside to the outside. Thus, no one need ask any more whether this food or this drink is pure or not. Jesus places the question of purity and impurity on a higher level, on the level of ethical behavior. He shows a way to God and, thus, fulfils the deepest desire of the crowd. Jesus ends his explanation with an expression that he likes to use: Anyone who has ears for listening should listen! Or: "That's it! You have heard me! Now try to understand!" In other words, use your heads and common sense and look at things through your experience of life.

- Mark 7: 17-23: Jesus' explanation to his disciples

The disciples did not understand what Jesus meant. When they went home they asked him for an explanation. Jesus was astounded. He thought that they had understood. In his explanation he goes deep into the question concerning purity. He declares all food pure! No food that goes into a human being from the outside can make him impure, because it does not enter the heart but only the stomach and then goes into the sewer. That which makes a person impure, says Jesus, is what comes from the inside, from the heart, and that poisons human relationships. Then he mentions: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly." Thus, in many ways, by means of word, action or living together, Jesus helped people to be pure. By means of the word, he healed lepers (Mk 1: 40-44), drove out impure spirits (Mk 1: 26, 39; 3: 15, 22, etc) and overcame death, source of all impurity. By means of action, the woman excluded and considered impure is healed (Mk 5: 25-34). By means of living with Jesus, the disciples have the courage to imitate Jesus who, without any fear of contamination, ate with people who were considered impure (Mk 2: 15- 17).

Further Information:

The laws concerning purity and impurity in Jesus' days

The people then were greatly concerned with purity. The norms concerning *purity* pointed to the necessary conditions for coming into the presence of God and for feeling right before him. One could not go before God in any old way. Because God is Holy! The Law said: "Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy!" (Lev 19: 2). Anyone who was not pure could not appear before God to receive the blessing promised to Abraham.

For us to understand the seriousness of these laws concerning purity, we may remember what used to happen in our Church fifty years ago. Before the Second Vatican Council, to go to communion in the morning, people had to fast from midnight. Anyone who went to communion without fasting committed a mortal sin called sacrilege. We thought that a little food or drink made us impure to receive the consecrated host.

In Jesus' times too there were many matters and activities that made a person impure and therefore not possible to come before God: touching a leper, eating with a publican, eating without washing one's hands, touching blood or a dead body and many other things. All these things made a person impure, and any contact with that person contaminated others. That is why "impure" people had to be avoided. People lived apart, always threatened by so many impure things that threatened their lives. All were afraid of everyone and everything.

Now, with the coming of Jesus, suddenly everything changes! By believing in Jesus, it was possible to achieve purity and feel good before God without having to observe all the laws and norms of the "tradition of the elders". It was a real and personal liberation! The Good News proclaimed by Jesus released people from a defensive attitude and restored to them the taste for life, the joy of being children of God, without fear of being happy!

Praying Psalm 24 (23)

Who Can Climb the Mountain of God!

To Yahweh belong the earth and all it contains, the world and all who live there; it is he who laid its foundations on the seas, on the flowing waters fixed it firm.

Who shall go up to the mountain of Yahweh?

Who shall take a stand in his holy place? The clean of hands and pure of heart, whose heart is not set on vanities, who does not swear an oath in order to deceive. Such a one will receive blessing from Yahweh, saving justice from the God of his salvation.

Such is the people that seeks him, that seeks your presence, God of Jacob. Gates, lift high your heads, raise high the ancient gateways, and the king of glory shall enter! Who is he, this king of glory?

It is Yahweh, strong and valiant, Yahweh valiant in battle. Gates, lift high your heads, raise high the ancient gateways, and the king of glory shall enter! Who is he, this king of glory?

Yahweh Sabaoth, he is the king of glory.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, August 30, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

every good thing comes from you. Fill our hearts with love for you, increase our faith, and by your constant care protect the good you have given us.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Luke 4: 16-30

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read, and they handed him the

scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord.

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, 'This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening.'

And he won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, surely?"

But he replied, "No doubt you will quote me the saying, 'Physician, heal yourself,' and tell me, 'We have heard all that happened in Capernaum, do the same here in your own country.'" And he went on, "In truth I tell you, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country. There were many widows in Israel, I can assure you, in Elijah's day, when heaven remained shut for three years and six months and a great famine raged throughout the land, but Elijah was not sent to any one of these; he was sent to a widow at Zarephath, a town in Sidonia. And in the prophet Elisha's time there were many suffering from virulent skin-diseases in Israel, but none of these was cured—only Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard this everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town; and they took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him off the cliff, but he passed straight through the crowd and walked away.

Reflection

Today we begin the meditation on the Gospel of Luke, which will extend three months until the end of the liturgical year. Today's Gospel speaks about Jesus' visit to Nazareth and the presentation of his program to the people of the Synagogue. In the first moment the people were admired. But immediately, when they become aware that Jesus wants to accept all, without excluding anyone, people rebel and want to kill him.

- Luke 4: 16-19: The proposal of Jesus. Urged by the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned to Galilee (Lk 4: 14) and begins to announce the Good News of the Kingdom of God. He goes to the community, teaches in the Synagogue, and arrives to Nazareth, where he had grown. He was returning to the community, in which he had participated since he was small, and during thirty years. The following Saturday, as it was the custom, Jesus went to the Synagogue to participate in the celebration, and he stands up to read. He chooses the text of Isaiah which speaks about the poor, of the prisoners, of the blind and the oppressed (Is 61: 1-2). This text is an image of the situation of the people of Galilee at the time of Jesus. The experience which Jesus had of God, the Father of Love, gave him a new look to evaluate the reality. In the name of God, Jesus takes a stand to defend the life of his people and, with the words of Isaiah, he defines his mission: (1) to announce the Good News to the poor, (2) to proclaim liberty to captives, (3) to give sight to the blind; (4) to release the oppressed, and taking the

ancient tradition of the prophets, (5) to proclaim “a year of grace from the Lord”. He proclaims the Jubilee Year!

- In the Bible, the “Jubilee Year” was an important Law. Every seven years, at the beginning (Dt 15: 1; Lv 25: 3) it was necessary to restore the land to the clan of origin. All had to be able to return to their own property; and this way they prevented the formation of large estates and families were guaranteed their livelihood. It was also necessary to forgive their debts and to redeem the persons who were slaves. (Dt 15: 1-18). It was not easy to have the Jubilee Year every seven years (cf. Jer 34: 8-16). After the exile, it was decided to have it every fifty years (Lv 25: 8-12). The objective of the Jubilee was and continues to be: to re-establish the rights of the poor, to accept the excluded and to re-integrate them into the society to live together with others. The Jubilee was a legal instrument to return to the original sense of the Law of God. This was an occasion offered by God to make a revision of the path being followed, to discover and to correct the errors and to start again from the beginning. Jesus begins his preaching proclaiming a Jubilee “A year of grace from the Lord”.
- Luke 4: 20-22: To unite the Bible and Life. Having finished the reading, Jesus updates the text of Isaiah and says: “This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening!” Taking the words of Isaiah as his own, Jesus gives them a full and definitive sense and he declares himself Messiah who comes to fulfil the prophecy. This way of updating the text provokes a reaction of discredit on the part of those who were in the Synagogue. They were scandalized and do not want to know anything about him. They do not accept that Jesus is the Messiah announced by Isaiah. They said: “Is he not the son of Joseph?” They were scandalized because Jesus speaks about accepting the poor, the blind and the oppressed. The people do not accept Jesus’ proposal. And, thus when he presents the project of accepting the excluded, he himself is excluded.
- Luke 4: 23-30: To overcome the limits of race. To help the community to overcome the scandal and to help them understand that his proposal formed part of tradition. Jesus tells two stories known in the Bible, the story of Elijah and the one of Elisha. Both stories criticize the mental closeness of the people of Nazareth. Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath (1 Kg 17: 7-16). Elisha was sent to take care of the foreigner of Syria (2 Kg 5: 14). Here arises the concern of Luke who wants to show that openness already comes from Jesus. Jesus had the same difficulty which the communities at the time of Luke were having. But the call of Jesus did not calm down people, all the contrary! The stories of Elijah and Elisha produced even greater anger. The community of Nazareth reaches the point of wanting to kill Jesus. But he keeps calm. The anger of others fails in drawing him away from his own path. Luke tells us that it is difficult to overcome the mentality of privilege and of mental closeness.

It is important to notice the details used in the Old Testament. Jesus quotes the text of Isaiah up to the point where it says: “to proclaim a year of grace from the Lord”. He does not quote the rest of the phrase which says: and a “day of vengeance from our God”. The people of Nazareth throw stones at Jesus because he pretends to be the Messiah, because he wants to accept the excluded and because he has omitted to read the

phrase about vengeance. They wanted the day of Yahweh to be a day of vengeance against the oppressors of the people. In this case, the coming of the Kingdom would not have been a true change or conversion of the system. Jesus does not accept this way of thinking; he does not accept vengeance (cf. Mt 5: 44-48) His new experience of God Father/Mother helped him to understand better the sense of the prophecies.

Personal Questions

- The program of Jesus is to accept the excluded. Do we accept everybody, or do we exclude some? Which are the reasons which lead us to exclude certain persons?
- Is the program of Jesus truly our program, my program? Who are the excluded whom we should accept better in our community? Who or what thing gives us the strength to carry out the mission which is entrusted to us by Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

How I love your Law, Lord! I ponder it all day long.

You make me wiser than my enemies

by your commandment which is mine forever. (Ps 119: 97-78)

Tuesday, August 31, 2021

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

every good thing comes from you. Fill our hearts with love for you, increase our faith, and by your constant care protect the good you have given us. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Luke 4: 31-37

Jesus went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and taught them on the Sabbath.

And his teaching made a deep impression on them because his word carried authority. In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean devil, and he shouted at the top of his voice, "Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God."

But Jesus rebuked it, saying, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" And the devil, throwing the man into the middle, went out of him without hurting him at all.

Astonishment seized them and they were all saying to one another, "What is it in his

words? He gives orders to unclean spirits with authority and power and they come out.” And the news of him travelled all through the surrounding countryside.

Reflection

In today's Gospel we can see the facts more closely: the admiration of the people because of the way Jesus taught and the cure of a man who was possessed by an unclean spirit. Not all the Evangelists give this account in the same way. For Luke, the first miracle is the peace with which Jesus liberates himself from the threat of death on the part of the people of Nazareth (Lk 4: 29-30) and the cure of the possessed man (Lk 4: 33-35). For Matthew, the first miracle is the cure of the sick and of the possessed (Mt 4: 23) or, more specifically, the cure of a leper (Mt 8: 1-4). For Mark, the miracle was the expulsion of the devil (Mk 1: 23- 26). For John, the first miracle was Cana, where Jesus changed the water into wine (Jn 2: 1-11). Thus, in the way of narrating things, each Evangelist, accordingly, indicates which was the greatest concern of Jesus.

- Luke 4: 31: The change of Jesus toward Capernaum: –Jesus descends to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and on Saturday he taught the people. Matthew says that Jesus went to live in Capernaum (Mt 4: 13). He changed his residence. Capernaum was a small city on the crossroad between two important streets: the one coming from Asia Minor and was leading to Petra on the south of Transjordan, and the other one coming from the region of the two rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates, and descended toward Egypt. The change toward Capernaum facilitated the contact with the people and the diffusion of the Good News.
- Luke 4: 32: Admiration of the people at the teaching of Jesus. The first thing that people perceive is that Jesus teaches in a different way. It is not so much the content that strikes them, but rather his way of teaching: “Jesus speaks with authority.” Mark adds that because of his different way of teaching; Jesus created a critical conscience among the people regarding the religious authority of his time. The people perceived and compared: “He teaches with authority, unlike the Scribes” (Mk 1: 22, 27). The Scribes taught quoting authority. Jesus does not quote any authority; rather he speaks starting from his experience of God and of his life.
- Luke 4: 33-35: Jesus fights against the power of evil. The first miracle is the expulsion of the devil. The power of evil took possession of persons, alienating them. Jesus restores the persons to be themselves again, giving them back the consciousness and liberty. He does this thanks to the force of his word: “Be quiet! Come out of him!” And on another occasion, he says: “But if it is through the finger of God that I drive devils out, then the Kingdom of God has indeed caught you unawares” (Lk 11: 20). Today, also, many people live alienated from themselves, subjugated by the means of communication, by the propaganda of the government and of business. They live slaves of consumerism, oppressed by debts and threatened by creditors. People think that they do not live well if they do not have everything which the propaganda announces. It is not easy to expel this power which today, alienates many people, and return the persons to be themselves again.

- Luke 4: 36-37: The reaction of the people: he gives orders to the unclean spirits. Jesus not only has a diverse way of teaching the things of God, but another aspect which causes admiration in the people is his power over unclean spirits: "What is it in his words? He gives orders to unclean spirits with authority and power, and they come out." Jesus opens a new path so that the people can place themselves before God to pray and to receive the blessings promised to Abraham. Before, they had to purify themselves. There were many laws and norms which made the life of the people difficult and marginalized many persons who were considered impure. But now, purified by faith in Jesus, persons could once again place themselves before God and pray to him, without the need to have recourse to the complicated norms of purity which were frequently expensive.

Personal Questions

- Jesus causes admiration and astonishment among the people. Does the way of acting of our community cause admiration among the people of the neighborhood? What type of admiration?
- Jesus drives out the power of evil and restores the persons to be themselves again. Today many persons live alienated from everything and from all. How can we help them to recover and be themselves again?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is tenderness and pity, slow to anger, full of faithful love. Yahweh is generous to all, his tenderness embraces all his creatures. (Ps 145: 8-9)