

Commentary to the 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)

Introduction



There is no page of Scripture that the theme of vocation does not appear in some way. “In the beginning, God calls the creatures to existence” (Wis 11:25), calls man to life and when Adam turns away from him he asks: Where are you? (Gen 3:9). God calls a people and prefers them among all the peoples of the earth (Dt 10:14-15). He calls Abraham, Moses, the prophets and gives them a mission to bring to fruition, a plan of salvation to be realized. He also calls the stars of the firmament by name and they respond: Here we are! They rejoice and shine with gladness for him who created them (Bar 3:34-35). Understanding these vocations is to discover the plan that God has for each of his creatures, and of every person. Nobody and nothing is useless: every person, every being has a function, a job to do.

“Out of Egypt have I called my son”—the Lord declares by the mouth of Hosea (Hos 11:1). Matthew (Mt 2:15) applies this prophecy to Jesus. Yes, he also has a vocation: to retrace the stages of the exodus, to overcome the temptations and to reach freedom with all the people.

And our vocation?

“God has called us with a holy calling” (2 Tim 1:9). He called us “through the gospel we preach, for he willed you to share the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord” (2 Thes 2:14).

The paths that lead to this goal are different for each of us. There is the way of one who is married and one who is celibate. There is the path of the saints and the sick, the widows, the separated ones, and of the engaged couples. What is important is to listen and discover where God wants to lead each one and “to live the vocation you have received” (Eph 4:1). “Angel of the Lord” is whoever supports the brother and helps him discern and continue along the path laid for him by God.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Lord, what do you want me to do? Help me to understand and to realize your plan of love.”

First Reading: Isaiah 49:3,5-6

We have already seen at the feast of Jesus’ Baptism, the “Servant of the Lord,” spoken in the reading. Today it is he himself who tells his vocation.

Like the other great personalities of the old and new Testament (Jer 1:5; the Baptist: Lk 1:15; Paul: Gal 1:15), he is also chosen by God from the maternal womb and is sent to fulfill a great mission.

It is difficult to determine whether the prophet refers to a real historical figure (Jeremiah? Moses?) or if, by “Servant of the Lord” he meant the collectivity of Israel. The first verse of today’s reading seems to favor this second interpretation (v. 3) but the next one seems to contradict it. Israel would be sent by the Lord... to reunite Israel (v. 5).

The most current and respectful identification of the text is, probably, one of who considers it a personification of the “faithful remnant of Israel.” It would be, that is, the image of pious persons who, in the midst of a people distanced from its God, were able to resist the lure of paganism.

We are in Babylon in the VI century B.C. For decades, the Israelites were humiliated and degraded, in a foreign land. They have nearly abandoned all their dreams of greatness. When they look back at their glorious past, they only experienced hardship and despair. “Sing for us the songs of Zion,” those who deported them ask (Ps 137:3). But how to sing the song of victory made by their fathers on the shores of the Red Sea, now that they are slaves, and far from their homeland?

In this humanly hopeless situation, the small remnant, the faithful Israel is called by the Lord. He entrusts them with a two-fold task: to reunite all the children of his people, dispersed among the nations, to bring them into the land of their fathers (v. 5) and to become light and sign of salvation to the ends of the earth (v. 6).

The choice of this Servant is contrary to all human logic. The undertaking he is called to can be accomplished only by someone who has exceptional skills and resources. Instead, it is precisely through this weak servant that the Lord has decided to manifest “his glory” (v. 3). He appreciates him and gives him his power (v. 5).

We do not know what type of historical character inspired the prophet in sketching the figure of the “Servant of the Lord”. That which is certain is that the early Christians saw his features perfectly reproduced in Jesus. Like the “Servant,” Jesus carried out his mission by gathering the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 10:6). He wished that his light shone above all in Galilee: in the “land of Zebulon and Naphtali,” the people who lived in darkness have seen a great light (Mt 4:15-16). Then, like that of the “Servant of the Lord” (Is 49:4), Jesus’ activity in favor of Israel ended a failure, with

an ignominious death, but God intervened. He changed into triumph the apparent defeat. After Easter, the mission of Christ is extended—like that of the Servant—to the whole world. “Go, therefore—he ordered his disciples—and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. I am with you always, even to the end of this world” (Mt 28:19-20).

The first letter to the Corinthians—from which the second reading of the next six Sundays will be taken—is written by Paul to solve some serious problems that have arisen in the community: anarchy and disturbances during the Eucharistic celebration, dissension and jealousy, lack of clarity on some moral issues, confusion of ideas concerning the resurrection of the dead. Today, the introduction of this letter is proposed to us. In it, the senders (Paul and the brother Sosthenes) and the recipients (the church of God which is at Corinth) are listed. The greeting of grace and peace is addressed to the believers. Only three verses, but the theological themes worth highlighting are emphasized.

First of all, Paul presents himself as an apostle by vocation. Apostle is one who is sent to preach the gospel where no one has yet announced it; is one who sows the seed from which it arises, sprouts and grows until it reaches the full development of the community. Further on in his letter, Paul will precisely use this image: “I planted, Apollos watered the plant, but God made it grow” (1 Cor 3:6).

Before considering the merits of the issues that he intends to address (which he will do very severely), Paul feels the need to invoke and justify his authority. Unlike the rabbis and teachers of his time, he himself does not appeal to studies done; neither to wisdom nor to experience he has accumulated over the years. He refers to his personal vocation received from God.

Here, again, we have the theme of vocation that we found in the first reading: Paul is chosen and is entrusted with a task: to be an apostle. He remembers this vocation in order to have the Corinthians accept his words, exhortations, and decisions. He does not expound his own doctrines, but he speaks in the name of God who sent him.

Besides Paul, verse 1 cites Sosthenes. Who is he? The Acts of the Apostles mentions a certain Sosthenes, the chief of the synagogue of Corinth. He, along with other Jews, one day had dragged Paul to court to have him convicted of blasphemy, in front of the proconsul Gallio who, besides being incredulous and amused, watched a discussion unimportant to him. The theological debate had become more and more lit up and had turned into a brawl. Sosthenes got the worst of it. No one knew why. He had been beaten by his own co-religionists (Acts 18:12-17). If it is the same person, we can conclude that the beatings he received ... have served to bring him to his senses.

The recipient of the letter is—as we have already pointed out—“the church of God, which is at Corinth” (v. 2). It is the community, the “group of Christians” of that city. Church means people convened, “people called” by God. It is still the theme of vocation that comes back. If the Corinthians became believers, it is because God “called” them, “chose” them.

The Corinthian Christians are convoked saints (v. 2). “Holy” means “separated,” placed apart, reserved for God. The Corinthian are saints because they are different from the pagans. They do not live in a ghetto, far away from others—this would be contrary to the gospel that wants them to be “salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13) and “yeast” that leavens the flour (Mt 13:33). They are separated that they lead a life guided by different principles from those of the pagans. Paul appeals to this holiness to introduce a stricter reminder against the immoral behavior of some members of that community.

Finally, the Apostle’s insistence on unity that must reign among the Christian believers is stressed. The Corinthians cannot forget that their community is part of the universal church. The definition that is given to this church is striking: all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 2).

The reason for this appeal will be understood later (already taken from the reading of next week). He is preparing a hard intervention against the divisions and disagreements that occurred in the community.

Gospel: John 1:29-34

The three synoptic gospels begin the account of Jesus’ public life, remembering his baptism. John ignores this episode, however, he devotes considerable space to the Baptist. He frames him, from the earliest verses, in an original way. He presents him as “a man sent by God as a witness to introduce the Light” (Jn 1:6-8). His life and his preaching provoke questions, expectations, and hopes in the people. A rumor even circulates that he is the messiah. A delegation of priests and Levites goes beyond the Jordan to question him. They want a clarification on his identity and his work. He replied: “I am not the Christ. I baptize with water, but among you stands one whom you do not know; although he comes after me, I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal” (Jn 1:19-28).

It is in this context that our passage is inserted.

The protagonist, Jesus, enters the scene. He was evoked by the Baptist in the debate with the envoys of the Jews. Seeing Jesus coming towards him, John exclaims: “Behold the lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world” (v. 29). It is a statement, which—as we shall see—is full of meanings and biblical evocations.

The Baptist shows of having guessed Jesus’ identity, yet ignored by all. How does he come to discover it? Why does he define him with a so singular an image? There was never a person in the Old Testament called “lamb of God.” The expression marks the culmination of his long and arduous spiritual journey. It started, in fact, from a complete ignorance. “I did not know him” he exclaims twice (vv. 31,33).

Whoever wants to arrive “to the sublimity of knowing Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8) must begin to become aware of one’s own ignorance.

We said the image of the lamb of God is strange. The Baptist had other images available: shepherd,

king, and stern judge. He also used the last one: “One stronger than me comes. He has a winnowing fan to clear his threshing floor and gather the grain into his barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out” (Lk 3:16-17). But—in his mind—not one summed up his discovery of the identity of Jesus better than the Lamb of God.

Educated probably among the Essene monks of Qumran, he had assimilated the spirituality of his people. He knew the history and was familiar with the Scriptures. A pious Israelite, he knew that his listeners, hearing the emphasis on the lamb, would have immediately understood the allusion to the paschal lamb whose blood, placed on the doorposts of the houses in Egypt, had saved their fathers from the slaughter of the exterminating Angel. The Baptist saw the fate of Jesus. One day he would be sacrificed, like a lamb, and his blood would remove the evil forces’ capacity to do harm. His sacrifice would redeem man from sin and death. Noting that Jesus is sentenced to death at midday of the Paschal vigil (Jn 19:14), John the Evangelist has certainly wanted to draw this same symbolism. It was, in fact, the hour in which, in the temple, the priest began to sacrifice the lambs.

There is a second reference in the words of John the Baptist. Those who remember the prophecies in the book of Isaiah—and every Israelite knew them very well—cannot but be aware of the call to the ignominious end of the Servant of the Lord also mentioned in today’s first reading. Here’s how the prophet describes his move towards death: “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, like a dumb sheep before its shearers... he was numbered with the transgressors, but instead, he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors” (Is 53:7,12).

In this text, the image of the lamb is linked to the destruction of sin. Jesus—the Baptist meant to say—will bear the load of all the weaknesses, miseries, iniquities of people, and with his meekness, with the gift of his life, will annihilate them. He will not eliminate evil by conceding a sort of amnesty, pardon, and healing. He will overcome it introducing into the world a dynamism, a new irresistible force—his Spirit—which will bring good and life to people.

The Baptist has in mind a third biblical call: the lamb is also associated with the sacrifice of Abraham. Isaac, while walking alongside his father to Mount Moriah, asks: “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” Abraham replies: “God himself will provide the lamb” (Gen 22:7-8).

“Behold the Lamb of God!” The Baptist now answers. It is Jesus, given by God to the world to be sacrificed instead of the sinful man deserving punishment.

The details of the story of Genesis (22:1-18) are also well known and the Baptist intends to apply them to Jesus. Like Isaac, he is the only son, the beloved, the one who brings the wood to the place of sacrifice. The particular additions of the rabbis also fit him. Isaac—they said—offered himself spontaneously instead of fleeing. He gave himself to the father to be bound on the altar. Jesus also freely gave his life for love.

At this point, one wonders if indeed the Baptist had in mind all these biblical references when, on two occasions, turning to Jesus, he declared: “Behold the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29,36).

Perhaps no but certainly John the evangelist had them in mind. He wanted to offer a catechesis to the

Christians of his communities and to us.

In the second part of the passage (vv. 32-34), the testimony of John the Baptist is presented. He recognizes as “Son of God” the one on whom he saw the Spirit descended and remained. The reference is to the baptism scene narrated by the synoptic Gospels (Mk 1:9-11). John introduces, however, a significant detail: the Spirit is not just seen descending upon Jesus but remaining in him.

The Old Testament speaks often of God’s spirit that takes possession of people giving them strength, determination, courage, so as to make them irresistible. It speaks of his descent upon the prophets that are enabled to speak in the name of God. The characteristic of this spirit is its being provisional. It remains in these privileged persons until they have fulfilled their mission. Then it leaves them and they return to normal life. Their ability, intelligence, wisdom and superior force disappear. In Jesus, instead, the Spirit remains permanently stable. The stability in the Bible is attributed only to God. He is the only “living being that remains forever” (Dan 6:27, and only his word “abides forever” (1 Pt 1:25).

Through Jesus, the Spirit came into the world. No opposing force will drive or overcome him and from him, the Spirit will be poured out on each person. It is the baptism “in the Holy Spirit” announced by John the Baptist (v. 33). Intimately united to Christ, as branches on a lush vine and full of sap, the believers will bring abundant fruits (Jn 15:5). They will dwell in God and God in them (1 Jn 4:16), will receive the stability in goodness which is of God, because, while “the world is passing away with its lust, whoever does the will of God remains firm forever” (1 Jn 2:17).

It is this message of hope and joy that, through the Baptist, John, from the very first page of his gospel, wants to announce to the disciples. Despite the apparent overwhelming power of evil in the world, what awaits humanity is the communion of life “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” These things—John says—I write “so that our joy may be complete” (1 Jn 1:3-4).

There is a video available by Fr. Fernando Armellini with commentary for today’s Gospel:

<http://www.bibleclaret.org/videos>

- See more at: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.8BlyjHbu.dpuf>

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