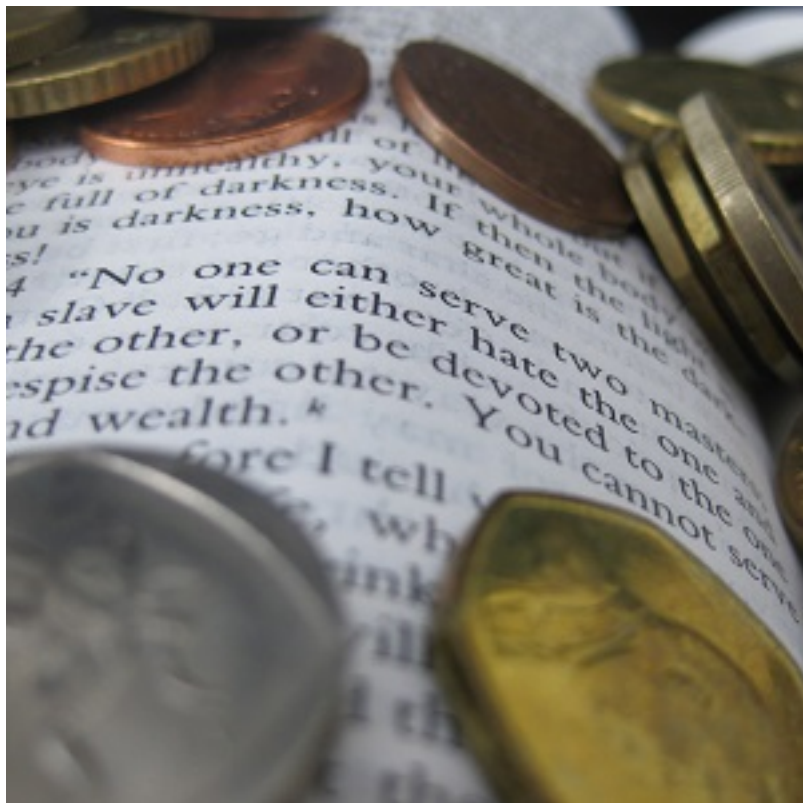


Commentary to the 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

The care of God who is mother and father

Introduction



Faith is often sorely tested by the absurdity of certain situations, events that seem to prove the absence of God, or at least his lack of interest in what is happening in the world. The psalmists dare direct him almost blasphemous accusations: “Why have you forsaken me? I invoke you and you do not answer” (Ps 22:2). “How long, Lord, will you forget me?” (Ps 13:2).

It is what the mystics call the “dark night” in which all certainty and even hope falter. It is the case—and I quote one example among many—of Therese of Lisieux, who, at the end of her life, heard a mocking voice inwardly repeating: “You think you can get out of the clouds that surround you. No, death will not give you what you hope for, but an even darker night, the night of nothingness.”

What does God prove in the face of our anguish, doubts, torments? Is he sensitive to our pain?

God responds to these questions with a question: Can a mother forget her child? Then, like realizing that not even this comparison expresses his true love and his concern for man, God said: “Can a woman forget the baby at her breast? Yet though she forgets, I will never forget you.” (Is 49:15).

The maternal image is effective that is why it is resumed: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you” (Is 66:13). The promise of Sirach is touching: “Then you will be like a son of the Most High and he will love you more than your own mother” (Sir 4:10).

Hard to believe at times, but one day we will find that it was true.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“I am calm and serene, like a weaned child in the arms of its mother.”

First Reading: Isaiah 49:14-15

In Israel, the husband had to think long and hard before divorcing his wife because it was an irreversible choice. They were not allowed second thoughts; he was not permitted to take her back. Exiled in Babylon, Israel feels herself a rejected bride. She knows that she was unfaithful having betrayed her God. She has abandoned any hope of rebuilding the broken relationship of love and, sadly keeps repeating: “Yahweh has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” (v. 14). It is the lament at the beginning of today’s reading. It is the expression of the painful experience of one who fell into the abyss of sin. She realizes to have made choices of death and is convinced that the Lord refuses him. These thoughts arise when we project in God our judging criteria and our meanness. The sensitive, touchy and even vindictive God appears. This deformation of his face is the most insidious of the diabolic wiles and the Lord takes care of deleting it. For the prophet declares, “who can abandon his first beloved? With everlasting love I have had mercy on you” (Is 54:6-7).

His love is not an answer to man’s merits or demonstrations of affection. It is a boundless passion that is beyond our good works. It is like the love of a mother—the new, poignant metaphor introduced by today’s reading (v. 16). It is an unconditional and invincible love. A mother loves her child not because she is loved in return but because he is her son and she will always love him, whatever he does.

This image has already in itself a strong emotional resonance, however, to understand all its richness, some famous figures of biblical mothers are worth mentioning: the sublime heroism of Rizpah who “from the beginning of the barley harvest, until rain fell from the sky,” she guarded the dead bodies of the children brought to death by David (2 S 21), and the courage of the mother of Moses defying pharaoh’s order while saving his son (Ex 2:2-9), the torment of the harlot who agrees to be deprived of her son provided he is spared of his life (1 K 3:16-17), and the fortitude of the mother that encourages the sons to face death than deny the faith (2 Mac 7).

This whole load of emotions and feelings is the image of a mother and helps to understand the passion with which God loves and cares man.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

The word of the Gospel is the greatest gift one can receive. For this reason, it is easy to feel deep sympathy and gratitude for the person who has offered it. One can also bind oneself too much to the messenger. It happens today and it also happened in the community of Corinth. Attachment to one and the other of the apostles cause the rise of divisions: some gloried of belonging to Peter, others to Apollo, and still others to Paul (1 Cor 1:12).

Today’s passage concludes the long discussion of this issue beginning with the stern warning: “Is Christ divided or have I, Paul, been crucified for you? Have you been baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:13).

Paul uses the plural—“let everyone then see us as ministers of Christ and stewards of the secret works of God” (v. 1). It is because he does not speak only of himself but refers to all the preachers of the gospel. With two expressive terms, he defines the role: they are the ministers (hyperetai in Greek) i.e.

servants who freely agreed to undertake an assignment. They are subordinates, employees at the service of a Lord, Christ. They are the administrators (oikonomoi in Greek, economic-household management) not the bosses. They hold God's assets entrusted to them to bear fruit.

Administrators are only required to be faithful (v. 2). Whoever proclaims the gospel—Paul intends to say—must have only one concern: to convey the message of the Master, without adding or removing anything. The master will not demand if he succeeds in convincing many people, if he has received the sympathy of men, if he received applauses and approvals. He will only ask if he has announced the gospel according to the truth, without giving in to opportunisms, without going to compromises, without human respects.

In the second part of the passage (vv. 3-5), Paul responds to criticisms that the Corinthians bring up against him. He assures that he is not worried at all of the judgment directed to him, whether they be an approval or condemnation. He is not accountable to the Corinthians of what he does but to God. He does not even trust the judgment of his conscience, though, honestly, he recognizes that it does not reproach him (v. 4). He keeps this judgment in mind, but he does not consider it definitive. He waits that of the Lord which will be delivered at the end of the hard “work day”.

The words of the Apostle are not an invitation to ignore the judgment that a community pronounces on who ministers to them. The community has the right and duty to express their views on the work of the ministers and administrators. They, in turn, cannot arrogantly claim the right to act in an arbitrary manner and to “act as masters” (1 Pt 5:3). But we must not forget that, at the end, “each will have his praise from God.”

Gospel: Matthew 6:24-34

The child who loses his parents cannot stand alone; he needs to have someone to put his trust, someone who will give him security. He spontaneously seeks a model, a reference point in life.

It also happens with God. He cannot do less. He could not let them remain orphans; who refuses him will immediately be replaced. The danger is not atheism but the choice of a wrong god.

Many believe that there is a Father in heaven who takes care of them. They are convinced that He also has maternal feelings toward them. He shows interest, with affection and solicitude, of their needs. If he is the father of all, people are not just traveling companions, more or less sympathetic neighbors and deserving of attention. They are not the antagonists with which to compete, or worse, enemies to fight, but brothers to love and help.

Not everyone accepts this Father. To one who rejects him, money immediately presents itself with all its enchanting charm, the most seductive, the most insidious of the idols. Today's Gospel begins with a denunciation of the danger of this idol (v. 24).

Matthew has preserved for us the Aramaic word—*mamona*—used by Jesus. It is important: it derives from the root “aman” which means offering safety, being robust, reliable. Money, like God, provides all good things to one who pays it worship: gives food, beverages, health, pleasures, amusements, but what does it ask in return? Like any god, it demands everything.

God is the reference point of the thoughts, actions of human life, and wants to be loved “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength” (Dt 6:5). Money also expects the total involvement of its devotees. For its sake one must be willing to renounce one's own dignity, to deceive, to rob, to ruin the others, to lose friendships, to neglect even the wife and children (one has no more time for them), and must also be ready to kill. Those who worship money have everything but they are no longer people; they become slaves. “The love of money—the author of the Epistle to Timothy writes—is the root of all evils. Because of this greed, some have wandered away from the faith, bringing on

themselves afflictions of every kind” (1 Tim 6:10), it is an idolatry (Eph 5:5).

The first madness that drags the worship of mamona is accumulation. Who accumulates illudes himself of having found a concrete and gratifying object which gives meaning to life. However, he has only found a vain stopgap to exorcise the thought of death. “To leave a legacy” is a palliative.

The Father who is in heaven is directly against it. He invites people to renounce the selfish use of money. He does not ask “do not steal”, to give alms, but to establish a completely new relationship with goods. He proposes sharing, paying attention to the needs of others. Any form of selfish accumulation is a violation of the first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3).

No one can serve two masters, either he will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. It’s not possible to serve God and mamona.

We would like to keep both of them as good, convinced that what one does not grant us the other will do. But the two are not partners in business. They are antagonists. They cannot be together in the heart of a person. They give contrasting orders. The Father who is in heaven repeats: “Love, help your brother, give food to the hungry, clothe the naked, offer hospitality to the homeless.” Instead, money orders: “Take advantage of the poor, do not give anything for free, do not worry about those who are in need, respect and appreciate people in proportion to what they own.”

The detachment from goods is one of the recurring themes in the gospel. It is one of the most difficult to assimilate. In fact, man becomes attached to the treasures of this world. He tends to idolize goods, forgetting the legacy “that does not corrupt nor goes bad nor passes away was reserved for you in heaven” (1 Pt 1:4).

Since his first speech—that of the mountain from which today’s reading is taken—Jesus warns the disciples. “Do not store up treasures for yourselves here on earth, where moth and rust destroy it, and where thieves can steal it. For where your treasure is, there also your heart will be” (Mt 6:19-21). To one who wants to follow him, Jesus asks him to give also his cloak and recommends not to turn his back to whoever asks for a loan (Mt 6:40,42).

The demands of Jesus are paradoxical and disconcerting. Before deciding to accept them, one has to ask oneself: How will my life be? What will I eat, drink and what will I put on? Who assures me that I’ll have enough to live on then? Will I not regret having given up the accumulated and enjoyed security money offers? Would it not be better to limit myself to bestowing some alms?

Jesus responds to these questions in the second part of today’s gospel (vv. 25-34) where he invites people to have confidence in the Father who is in heaven. He takes care of his children and will not leave in need those who believed in him.

The images that show God’s care towards his creatures are delightful: “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow, they do not harvest and do not store food in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not less worthy than they are? Look at how the flowers in the fields grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you not even Solomon in all his wealth was clothed like one of these” (vv. 26-29). It somehow gives an impression of being a naïve dreamer, of proposing a carefree, joyful life, but completely detached from reality.

It’s not like this. Jesus does not suggest disengagement, laziness, disinterest or resignation. He proposes a new relationship with the goods: not hoarding but sharing based on trust in God’s providence.

It recalls the experience of Exodus: Israel was a people on the move. They could not accumulate. They planted temporary tents, did not build solid and immovable warehouses. The manna could not be collected in quantities greater than that needed for a day, otherwise, it rotted and filled with maggots (Ex 16:17-20). The land was not owned by anyone. Each possessed that small area trampled on only

for a moment. Then, when he moves his foot forward that property was not his any longer. It became property of one who followed him.

In this way, God had educated his people on detachment from goods. Although necessary for life, they are corruptible and passing but they seduce, charm and make one lose sight of the goal.

The rabbis noticed that the Israelites had followed Moses into the wilderness without ever asking him: “How can we cross the desert, without taking with us the supply for the trip?”

Jesus does not condemn the planning, foresight. He disapproves of the worry about tomorrow, the anxiety that makes one lose the joy of living. It inevitably leads to accumulating and transforming into dehumanizing idols the goods of this world.

Do not worry, do not be anxious: these verbs are repeated six times in today’s passage. They are an echo of the wise reflections of Sirach: “Chase sorrow far away for sorrow has destroyed many and never did good to anyone. The cares of the present day prevent sleep; in the same way, serious illness makes rest impossible” (Sir 30:23–31:2).

Worry is common to the poor as well as to the rich. Money does not only eliminate concern and worry, but it sharpens and heightens them. We know the sleepless nights of the unemployed, penniless fathers of families with wives and children to support. We also know that anxieties are useless; they do not help to resolve the problems of food and clothes. They are a waste of energy.

Jesus suggests his remedy to this disease: Raise up the gaze towards the other, towards the Father who is in heaven. This does not mean remaining with our hands tied, but facing reality with a new heart.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrew echoes the words of Jesus: “Do not depend on money. Be content with having enough for today for God has said: I will never forsake you or abandon you” (Heb 13:5).

Even in the face of the most serious difficulties, Jesus invites us to maintain inner peace. Man’s life is in the hands of God who never abandons his children. He accompanies them at all times, blesses their efforts and their commitment.

- See more at: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.x2YRhOrH.dpuf>

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