

Commentary to Palm Sunday, (Year A)

His crime to have loved and taught to love

Introduction



Jesus is at table with the Twelve and, while they are having dinner, he turns to them, saying, “One of you will betray me.” Then they, deeply saddened, begin to ask him, one by one, “Surely not I, Lord?” Judas, the traitor, says, “Is it I, Rabbi?” Jesus replied, “You have said it” (Mt 26:20-25).

One should know if he is a traitor or not; what need is there to ask Christ? Judas is hypocritical until the end but why do the others ask, “Is it I?”

If things had gone just in this way, the response of Jesus that unmask the traitor would have been followed by the immediate reaction of the eleven and the settling of accounts with the culprit. Instead, dinner quietly resumes.

One pastoral concern moves Matthew to place the question on the lips of everyone present. He wants every Christian to continue to ask the question: Am I a traitor?

Judas is the symbol of the anti-disciple, one who cultivates projects opposite to those of Jesus. He is one who is willing to betray his faith for the sake of money. He is ready to place himself at the head of those who struggle against the forces of good.

The true disciple does not illude himself to be immuned from this danger. He knows his own frailty; he knows that can easily become self-deluded and, perhaps in good faith transforms himself a traitor, siding against the Master, playing the game of the enemies of life.

Only the constant comparison with the word of God and the supreme gesture of his love can prevent naive, arrogant certainties and tragic illusions.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Only those who respond to hatred with love introduces in the world a novelty and a principle of life.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |
Gospel-----

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7

Explaining the first reading of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we talked about a mysterious character who comes in the scene in the second part of the book of Isaiah. It is about the “Servant of the Lord.” In today’s reading, this “Servant” reappears and speaks.

It initially describes the mission given to him. He is sent to proclaim a message of consolation to the downtrodden and without hope (v. 4). He only and always speaks words of comfort to those lost in evil ways and not able to find back the right way, for those wrapped up and grope in darkness.

He then clarifies the way with which he will fulfill his mission (vv. 4-5). The Lord gave him an ear to listen and a mouth able to communicate. What he heard was not pleasant, but he did not accept compromises. He did not pull back and knew how to resist (v. 5).

Finally, he recounts what happened to him and what were the consequences of his coherence. He faithfully communicated the message heard. He was beaten, insulted, slapped, spat in the face but he did not react. He continued to trust in the Lord (v. 7).

Listening particularly to the last part of the reading, one is spontaneously induced to take this Servant as Jesus (Christians have made this link immediately after Easter). As “Servant of the Lord” Jesus kept listening to the Father and spoke only words of consolation and hope. He gave comfort to the disheartened and marginalized. He ended like the Servant as spoken in the book of Isaiah (cf. Mt 27:27-31).

The risk is to pause to contemplate and admire the faithfulness of Jesus, to be moved in the face of what he has suffered, to feel outrage at the injustices he went through and to conclude that, even today, some hero faithful to God can repeat the same dramatic experience of the Servant of the Lord.

Not any hero, but every believer is called to carry out the mission of the “Servant” of Christ: to keep listening to the word of God, to translate into action what was heard and be willing to bear the consequences.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11

The community of Philippi was very good and Paul was proud of it. However, as if often happens, there was even a bit of envy among Christians. Someone was trying to attract attention to oneself and impose one's will on others. This situation caused Paul to make a heartfelt recommendation in the first part of the letter: "Make me very happy; have one love, one spirit, one feeling; do nothing through rivalry or vain conceit. Do not seek your own interest but rather that of others" (Phil 2:2-4).

To better impart this teaching in the minds and hearts of the Philippians, Paul presents the example of Christ. He does this by quoting a beautiful hymn, known in many Christian communities of the first century.

The hymn tells the story of Jesus in two stanzas.

He already existed before becoming man. Becoming incarnate "he emptied himself" of his divine greatness. He accepted to take on the nature of a slave of death. He was not clothed in our humanity as an outer garment which he could get rid of. He assumed our human likeness: weakness, ignorance, fragility, passions, feelings and mortal condition. He appeared to our eyes in the humility of the most despised of men, a slave, one to whom the Romans reserved the ignominious punishment of the cross (vv. 6-8).

But the path he has traveled has not ended with the humiliation and death on the cross.

The second part of the hymn (vv. 9-11) sings the glory to which he is raised: the Father raised and held him up as a model for every person. He gave him the power and dominion over all creation. The entire humanity will end up to be united with him and at that time the plan of God will be accomplished.

Gospel: Matthew 26:14–27:66

All the evangelists devote so much space to the story of the passion and death of Jesus. The facts are basically the same, though narrated in different ways and different perspectives. Each evangelist also presents his own episodes, details, underscores. These reveal his attention and interest in certain topics of catechesis, considered significant and urgent for his community.

Today's version of the passion being proposed to us is that of Matthew. In our comment, we will highlight only the characteristic aspects.

The first and most important is that Matthew punctuates the whole story with repeated references to the fulfillment of the Scriptures. When it was evening, Jesus sat at table with the Twelve. While they were eating, Jesus utters a phrase, the key to understanding everything that will happen as a result: "The Son of man is going as it is written of him" (Mt 26:24).

Later, in the garden of Olives, when the guards approach to arrest him as if he were a bandit, he reacts by saying, "But all this has happened to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets" (Mt 26:56).

Matthew notes that even the most marginal details of the passion—as, for instance, the betrayal of Judas

for thirty pieces of silver—were announced by the prophets (Mt 27:9-10).

We especially have a parallelism, wanted by this evangelist, between the passion of Jesus and the drama lived by the just spoken of in Psalm 22:

– Like Jesus on the cross (Mt 27:46) this man also turns to the Lord the cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:2).

– He is the object of the same derision: “All who see me make a jest of me; they sneer and shake their heads: He put his trust in the Lord, let the Lord rescue him. If the Lord is his friend, let him help him” (Ps 22:8-9). It is exactly what happened at the foot of the cross and the insults addressed to Jesus were identical (Mt 27:39,41-43).

– Like Jesus (Mt 27:34,48) he thirsts: “My throat is dried up like a potsherd” (Ps 22:16).

– He is surrounded by evildoers and says, “They have pierced my hands and feet” (Ps 22:17). He continues: “They divide my garments among them, casting lots for my raiment” (Ps 22:19). At the foot of the cross, the soldiers crucified him and divided his clothes among themselves (Mt 27:35).

– Like Jesus, finally (Mt 27:50) he also emits a cry (Ps 22:25).

– The correspondences are such and many. One tends to suppose that the author of the psalm meant to make an accurate prediction, right down to the details of what one day would happen to the Messiah. It's not like that.

The striking similarities are due to the evangelist's theological choice. He wanted to tell the passion and death of Jesus, bearing in mind the scheme of this psalm. He did it to help the readers to go beyond the mere matter of record and to grasp the deeper meaning of what was happening.

The other Evangelists also quote the scriptures, but none with so much insistence. The reason is that Matthew wrote his Gospel to the Jews who were educated in the catechesis of the rabbis to wait for a victorious, dominating, great and powerful messiah. Given the failure with which Jesus' life ended, who could have the courage to present him as the messiah?

At the foot of the cross, the priests, scribes and elders' challenge to Jesus: “Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Mt 27:40) is to be understood in this light. I am prone to believe in one who wins, not on who loses.

To the Jews and all those who, even today, are shocked by a defeated Messiah, Matthew responds: the Old Testament's prophecies announce a humiliated, persecuted and killed Messiah. They present him as the companion of every suffering and oppressed person.

God has not miraculously saved Christ from a difficult situation. He has not obstructed the injustice and the death of his Son. He, instead, transformed his defeat into victory, his death into birth, his tomb into a womb from which he was taken to a life without end.

In him God has made it known that he does not overcome evil by hindering it with miraculous interventions but by taking away its power to harm, even making it a time of growth for the man. Letting him be guided and enlightened by Scriptures—as Matthew tells us to do—it is difficult to assimilate this logic of God. It is difficult to accept that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

A second lesson on which Matthew particularly insists is the repudiation of violence and the use of weapons. Only he reports the words of Jesus to Peter, who tried to defend him with a sword: “Put your sword back into its place, for all who take hold of the sword will die by the sword” (Mt 26:52).

Tertullian, the famous apologist of the I-II century, commented: “Disarming Peter, Jesus took away the weapons from the hands of every soldier.” A few decades later, the biblical scholar Origine echoed, “We Christians no longer grip the sword; we don’t anymore learn the art of war because through Jesus we have become children of peace.”

The early Christians had no doubts: the disciple of Christ must be willing, like the Master, to give his life for his brothers and sisters, never and not for any reason to kill them.

One of the issues close to Matthew’s heart is the universalism of salvation.

Israel cannot consider herself the only and jealous depositary of the promises. He played the role that the Lord has entrusted to her: to prepare the coming of God’s kingdom. Now she is expected, first among the guests, in the banquet hall (Mt 22:1-6).

Unfortunately, Israel has rejected the invitation. In the early Christian community, it is experienced as a painful laceration, like a sword that pierces the soul (Lk 2:35), as “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7).

There are two facts in the passion narrative that only Matthew referred to: the dream of Pilate’s wife and the procurator’s gesture of washing his hands, unloading all the blame of Jesus’ death sentence on the Jews (Mt 27:19,24). They express in a symbolic way the drama of this people and the responsibility that she has taken not accepting the messiah sent to her by God. The maximum expression of this refusal is the cry: “His blood be on us and on our children” (Mt 27:25).

The nonsensical interpretation of this phrase has had tragic consequences: hatred, absurd accusations, violence, Christians’ persecutions against the Jews.

The meaning attributed to it by Matthew was totally different. Upset by the misfortunes that had struck the people in the second half of the first century A.D. and culminating with the destruction of Jerusalem, he had guessed the cause of all evil: The Jews had chosen violence and rejected the reign of peace announced by Jesus.

The evangelist wants to warn of the danger of repeating the same mistake. Who walks away from Christ to pursue other messiahs, who trusts in violence, who cultivates plans of domination always ends up causing disasters: He lets the blood fall on himself and on his own children.

Only Matthew tells the extraordinary events that occurred after the death of Jesus: “The earth quaked,

rocks were split, the dead were raised to life..." (Mt 27:51-56).

At that time it was thought that the world was full of iniquity and all awaited the birth of a new world. It was said that, during the transition between the two eras of humanity, the sun would be darkened; the trees would shed blood; the stones would break uttering cries and the dead would be resurrected.

That which Matthew says, therefore, should not be understood as the true account of something that happened on April 7 year 30, but as the affirmation of a theologian who, at the time of Jesus' death, is aware of the birth of a new world. His is a message of joy and hope, sent to all those who are in anguish and pain, and feel enveloped in the darkness of death. The kingdom of God began when, on the cross, the Lord has revealed all his love and his interest in the fate of humankind.

Another incident reported only by Matthew is the death of Judas (Mt 27:3-10).

This disciple is the symbol of all those who, for a time, follow Jesus. Then they are aware that he does not realize their dreams of glory and their thirst for power. They abandon him and even turn against him.

The episode is narrated along the lines of the one true suicide in the Old Testament, that of Ahithophel, a betrayer of David (2 Sam 17:23). It presents shadows and mysteries that will never be clarified from the historical point of view.

If we free ourselves from the stereotypes for a moment, we can experience respect and compassion for the plight of this man. Peter and John and the other Evangelists spoke about him in general. It seems that, in the group of the apostles, he had no friends. When he saw the only one who loved him go to his death, he must have felt terribly alone to carry the weight of his mistake. He's gone, unfortunately, to vent his remorse, his inner torment to the wrong people, the temple priests who used him. If he had turned to Christ, his life would end in another way.

Finally, only Matthew speaks of the guards placed in custody of the tomb (Mt 27:62-66): they are a sign of the triumph of evil. Their presence testifies that the righteous is defeated, the deliverer silenced, locked forever in a tomb.

It is the experience that we have: evil always gives the impression of being assured of a final triumph, such as to consider as dreams the poor, the weak and the defenseless' hope for justice.

God, however, ensures his unexpected intervention. His angel will roll every stone that prevents the return to life and will sit on it (Mt 28:2). The soldiers, placed to defend injustice and iniquity, will flee in terror from his light (Mt 28:4).

*There is a video available by Fr. Fernando Armellini with commentary for today's Gospel:
<http://www.bibleclaret.org/videos>*

See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.zZzH4NGW.dpuf>

