

Commentary to the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

It's really risky to go against the traffic

Introduction



Before entering a street, one must pay attention to the signs. It is necessary to determine whether, by chance, no one has ventured in a wrong way.

When observing the direction of travel in which other people move, the disciple of Christ has the immediate and sharp feeling of driving against traffic. If he chooses the paths of renunciation, the sharing of goods, unselfish love, pardon without limits, keeping one's word, he sees the traffic moving in the opposite direction. He realizes that, no matter how much he proceeds with caution and prudence, the clash becomes inevitable. He will always be the one to suffer, to be considered out of place, to be accused of breaking the rules accepted by all.

The wicked views the righteous as a “reproach to our way of thinking” (Wis 2:14), “creates embarrassment” (Wis 2:12); annoying “because he does not live like others and he behaves strangely” (Wis 2:15).

In times of persecution, doubt of taking the wrong direction can arise in a Christian.

After checking if he is really following the directions of the Master, he must not let himself be caught by fear. That is the right direction; it is he who guides with open eyes and proceeds in the light.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“We will not be asked if we won or lost, but if we have fought for the right cause.”

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

First Reading: Jeremiah 20:10-13

Jeremiah lives in one of the most dramatic moments in the history of his people. Nebuchadnezzar’s army surrounded Jerusalem and is going to take her by storm and plunder. The king and army commanders have completely lost their head and take foolish decisions. The religious leaders, instead of realizing that ruin is approaching, bless the choices of the military and incite people saying: “Everything is fine, nothing wrong will happen” (Jer 6:13-14), whereas everything goes bad and catastrophe was at hand.

Jeremiah seems the least likely candidate to enter this conflict. He is young, shy, sensitive, loves peaceable life, alien to controversy. His dream is to live quietly in Anathoth with his family, but the Lord called him to a difficult and risky mission “against the kings of Judah and its leaders, its priests and the people of the land.” “Get ready for action; stand up and say to them all that I command you... They will fight against you but shall not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue you” (Jer 1:17-19).

The priest, Pashur, son of Immer, chief superintendent of the temple is a sworn enemy of Jeremiah. This man scourges and puts the prophet in shackles. The next day, released from prison, Jeremiah meets him and, ironically, he mangles his name, calling him Magor, meaning terror, terror around (Jer 20:1-3). Pashur—ensures the prophet—he will no longer scare anyone, but soon it will be Pashur, startled and dismayed, searching desperately for refuge in some hiding place in the city, when the Babylonian soldiers chase him. He will be captured and enslaved; he will be carried into exile, where he will die along with those who deceived with lies: he promised peace, while the days of terror were approaching.

Today’s reading opens with the words of Jeremiah reminding the crowd’s reaction to his denouncements. Taking up the nickname addressed to Pashur—terror around—people mocks the Prophet calling him terror around, as if to say: Now you’re terrified, not Pashur, we all see that you are dying of fear.

The enemies of Jeremiah do not limit themselves to mockery and sarcasm. They plot, seeking reasons to strike up a show trial and be able to condemn him. They also think of lynching him (v. 10).

His best friends are muddled in the shouting crowd. The prophet, left alone, sees his mission fail; he feels rejected by his people and abandoned by all. At this point, discouragement, uncertainty, despair and even doubt that his vocation was a deception are inevitable and understandable. He unleashes his feeling to the Lord; he shouts to him all his pain, even to the point of cursing the day of his birth (Jer 20:14-18).

This prayer, made of bold expressions, but sincere, brings out in him the certainty of God’s faithfulness. The disappointments, adversities, persecutions have shaken, for a moment, his confidence and his hope, but have failed to suffocate and extinguish them. Here he is, in fact, to proclaim: “But

Yahweh, a mighty warrior, is with me” (v. 11). Now he is sure: God will intervene, will make the truth shine and will make the defender of the just cause triumph.

The reading’s last verses (vv. 12-13) contain a rather violent vent against the enemies. Jeremiah’s words should not be construed as an explosion of hatred, but as a just and humane wish, to see that his own reasons triumph, his innocence recognized and the wickedness of opponents exposed. It’s hard to be a prophet; it is difficult to tell the truth, to be the first to raise one’s voice, to denounce what is wrong. It is more comfortable to hide, to pretend not to see, to let the others talk. Still, if one wants a new society, a church more in keeping with the Gospel and more docile to the Spirit, if one aspires to a newness of life, prophets are needed. Like Jeremiah, may they have the courage to say what the Lord tells them, even at the risk of life.

Second Reading: Romans 5:12-15

In this very difficult passage from the Letter to the Romans, Paul compares Adam and Jesus: he contrasts the consequences of the sin of the first man to the justification done by Christ.

He says that, from the beginning, men have sinned and are not included in the plan of God. Then, over the centuries, they have continued to make mistakes and to practice injustice, following the example of Adam who had disobeyed and he had turned away from God.

Jesus behaved in the opposite way: he was obedient to the Father, he has fulfilled his will until death.

The consequence of Adam’s sin was death. Not biological death—which is a natural fact—but the “non-life” chosen by anyone who refuses to follow the footsteps of God. Grace obtained by the obedience of Christ, however, is far superior to the troubles caused by human senselessness. By merit of Christ, God has communicated to all his life.

Gospel: Matthew 10:26-33

The official documents issued in the name of Domitian began with: “Our Lord and God commands you to do the following ...”. He was the emperor who erected statues everywhere in his honor and demanded to be worshiped as a god. The consul Flavius Clemens, his cousin, converted to Christ, could not adhere to such insane requirement. He was executed and his wife Domitilla was exiled in Sardinia.

The worship of the emperor spread mostly in Asia Minor. A temple and a colossal statue to the god Domitian were erected in Ephesus. The local authorities, subservient to power, wanted everyone to bow down and worship the one whom the seer of Revelation calls “the beast” (Rev 13:4,12).

Christians could not bestow divine honors to the king. For this, misappropriations, punishments, discriminations, confiscation of properties started for them. Many could no longer bear these constant harassments. They were at the limit of endurance and the looming risk of apostasy. How to help them through this difficult time?

To encourage the Christians of his community, Matthew wrote in this historical context, which he inserted in his Gospel, the sayings of the Master regarding the difficulties and persecutions that the disciples would have had to bear.

For the Christians, persecution is not an accident; it is an inescapable fact. Even the author of the second letter to Timothy (written more or less in the same period) reminds us: “All who want to serve God in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12).

What recommendations did Jesus give to his persecuted disciples?

He begins to warn them of fear. Fear has a positive vital function: it signals the dangers, prevents rash, risky, foolish gestures. However, if it gets out of control, it hinders the courageous actions and resolute choices.

For those who have made the decision to follow Christ, fear is often the worst enemy. It manifests itself in the fear of losing one's position, of seeing the esteem of one's superiors diminished, of losing friendships, of being deprived of one's properties, of being punished, demoted, for some even of being killed. Whoever is afraid is no longer free. It is normal to be afraid, but woe to one dominated and guided by fear, one ends up paralyzed.

In today's Gospel, Jesus insists, three times: “Do not be afraid!” (vv. 26,28,31) and each time, he adds a motive to justify his recommendation. The announcer of the Gospel is afraid, first of all, because of the violence unleashed by the enemies of Christ, his mission might fail (vv. 26-27).

Jesus assures him that despite the trials and hardships, the gospel will spread and transform the world. To better clarify, he cites the example of the rabbis of his time. Before sending their disciples to discuss publicly in the streets, they instructed them in secret. Their wisdom remained hidden for a long time, but one day all the people were forced to acknowledge their wisdom and their preparation. The same thing—Jesus assures us—will happen to his apostles. They probably will not see the seeds of light and goodness that they have sown with toil and pain germinate. However, they must cultivate the joyful certainty that the harvest will grow and will be plentiful. Their work will not be in vain; though they be put to death, no enemy force will be able to prevent the realization of God's plan.

What happened to Jesus is revealing. His enemies were convinced they have silenced him forever, have put a huge, immovable rock on him and his message. However, on Easter day he is risen, just as the seed, buried in the ground, dies but only to reappear a hundredfold.

The second reason why one fears is the fear of being mistreated or even put to death (v. 28).

Jesus invites us to reflect: what harm can the enemies of the gospel do? To offend, accuse unjustly, beat, confiscate property, take away life! Yes, but nothing more! No violence is capable of depriving the disciple of the only lasting treasure: the life he has received from God and that no one can take away. Paul was deeply convinced: “I am certain of this: neither trials or anguish, persecution or hunger, lack of clothing or dangers or sword...nothing will separate us from the love of God, which we have in Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Rom 8:35-39).

But there is someone—Jesus continues—that is to be feared. It is “the one who has the power to destroy both soul and body”. It is not an external character to us. It is the evil that, since birth, we carry within us. It is the negative force that suggests paths opposed to those of Christ. So, we need to fear above all ourselves and our own fear. Have we not many times, for fear of being alone, cultivated ambiguous friendships or maintained relations that ended up making us slaves and preventing us from living? Have we not behaved in a cowardly manner, lied, committed acts of injustice because of fear? Whoever is afraid fails to accomplish what would lead him to realize his life and therefore...“perishes”.

The third reason why persecution frightens us is that oftentimes it does not only affect us, but also those around us who may be deprived of the necessary subsistence (vv. 29-31).

To this objection, Jesus responds by recalling the trust in the heavenly Father’s providence. He does not promise his disciples that nothing will happen, that they will always be rescued in a prodigious way. He assures God will still realize their true goodness if they have the courage to remain faithful. The recall that every hair on one’s head has already been counted by God is effective. No one can escape his love and his kindness. He is interested in every creature, even the smallest. The more he will follow the cause of one who is fighting for the coming of his kingdom!

The passage ends with a promise: Jesus will recognize, before his Father, those who have recognized him before people (vv. 32-33). He is not speaking of the final judgment but of the occurrences of the present times. He is recognized by some of his disciples working in the world but in others he is not. He is known to one who has not feared of proclaiming his gospel even at the cost of life. He is not recognized by those who do not follow his footsteps and by those who do not make his word present in the world. Before the Father, he will testify this reality.

Today there are still many people who are killed because of the Gospel. Even without bloodshed, persecution exists and it is unavoidable. Sometimes it openly manifests itself through insults, public taunts, other times through subtle and disguised marginalization, discrimination, exclusion ... One who has no concern of another has adapted the principles of this world and, perhaps, has given up the kingdom of God without realizing it.

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