

Commentary to the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time -Year A

The Impatient man and the Calm God

Introduction



The creative work began with the separation of light from darkness (Gen 1:4). The firmament was placed to separate the waters that are above the sky from those found on earth (Gen 1:6-7); God said, "Let there be lights in the ceiling of the sky to separate day from night" (Gen 1:14). At the end of these separations, the sacred author says: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

From that day, man, perhaps, unconsciously feared that opposites could merge again and bring chaos, the disorder that made life impossible. He is instinctively induced to erect fences and establish a separation between good and evil, pure and impure, saints and wicked, God's friends and his enemies. Some superficially interpreted texts of the Bible seem to approve such discrimination: "You are to be holy for me as I am holy, Yahweh, your God, and I have set you apart from the nations to be mine" (Lev 20:26).

The world came out good from the hand of God. However, the presence of evil remains an enigma, a disturbing element that man cannot stand. He is impatient as the servants in the parable. He asks himself: "Where did the weeds come from?" Frenzy, to immediately solve the tensions he experiences, takes over him. He ends up resorting to worse remedies of evil. He becomes intolerant and ruthless with himself and with others. He punishes cruelly, launches holy wars and gets carried away by anger that "never fulfills the justice of God" (Jas 1:20).

In this way he commits two errors. He does not accept serenely the reality of the world in which good and evil are destined to live together and confuse the growing season with the harvest.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"The presence of evil in the world does not endanger the success of the kingdom of God".

First reading: Wisdom 12,13.16-19

The Book of Wisdom was the last of the Old Testament to be written. Its author—a Jew of Alexandria—was probably still alive when Jesus was born.

For centuries, the majority of Jews lived scattered throughout the world. In every city of the Roman Empire they formed a community apart. They had their synagogues, rabbis, courts, festivals and traditions. They did not contract marriages with pagans and took every precaution to avoid being corrupted by the customs of others, not to be swayed by their morals and religious practices.

Some of these so-called Jews of the diaspora had found excellent accommodation abroad. They were pursuing profitable professions, but most lived in poverty and were also subject to discrimination. They asked themselves: why us, for being faithful to God's law, we are oppressed and humiliated, while the idolaters thrive? Why did God tolerate insults and injustices we suffer? Our father told us that, in the past, the Lord performed signs and wonders on behalf of his people. How come he now does not intervene anymore? Is his strength perhaps diminished?

In today's passage the author answers these questions. The strength of the Lord—he assures—is always the same, endless, but he does not use it to punish. He uses it only for the good of man. This is his righteousness: to use tolerance towards all. His dominion is universal; it covers the just and the wicked. He can not love only some (v. 16)

People use their power to instill fear and respect, or subjugate the weak and force them to remain subdued. God, however, despite being the owner of power, does not use it to impose his sovereignty; he does not resort to punishment, retaliation or revenge, but, with all, even with the wicked, he shows mercy and indulgence (vv. 17-18).

The two moving reasons in the last verse (v. 19) explain the surprising behavior of God. First, He is patient because He wants to teach his people that the just must love people. Yes, there are despicable actions, vile works, but no person deserves contempt; everyone deserves love. The second reason: God does not intervene with retaliation and punishment because he does not want the death of the wicked, but "that he turns from his ways and live" (Ezk 18:23); that's why he always offer him the possibility to repent (v. 19). Those expecting a punitive intervention is simply projecting their own vengeful instinct in God.

Second Reading: Romans 8:26-27

How does one pray? It would be simple enough if formulas are repeated. But Jesus told his disciples that their prayer is not of this kind. "When you pray, do not use a lot of words, as the pagans do; for they believe that the more they say, the more chance they have of being heard" (Mt 6:7).

In today's reading Paul acknowledges candidly: we do not know how to pray; we have no idea what to

ask from God and our prayers are often just attempts to make him adhere to our plans.

The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness and suggests to us the words that we must address to the Father (v. 26). To pray to God is to open the mind and the heart to his light and let oneself be ready to accept his will in every moment of life. Who gives us the light of God and gives us the strength to follow it is the Spirit, "he who probes everything, even the depth of God" (1 Cor 2:10) and makes us partakers of His mysteries. The thoughts of God are incomprehensible for the wisdom of this world (1 Cor 2:3-7), so Paul calls them "unspeakable groanings."

The prayer that comes from the Spirit is always answered because it is in conformity with the desires of God. It is not trying to bend his will to ours, but gets our conversion to him (v. 27).

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-43

With three other parables Jesus gradually reveals the mystery of the kingdom of heaven. The first—that of the wheat and the tares (vv. 24-30)—gets an explanation (vv. 36-43) as that of the last Sunday's sower. This is a preacher's sermon of the time of Matthew. The two other parables—that of the mustard seed and the leaven (vv. 31-33)—are told to emphasize the irresistible force of good. The vv. 34-35 retake what was said in vv. 10-17 and clarify the reason why Jesus speaks in parables. Let's look at the main parts of the passage.

Where does the weed come from? (vv. 24-30).

The already existing evil—which man has never been able to give a satisfying answer—is a distressing problem. In addition to this, Matthew's Christian communities had to deal with a second, no less serious. Fifty years had passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus. They looked around themselves and realized that evil was present and continued to increase and flourish. Why is the kingdom of heaven, inaugurated by Jesus, never had a total and immediate success?

The question was embarrassing. Someone formulated it in ironic and provocative terms: "Since our fathers in faith died, everything still goes on, as it was from the beginning of the world" (2 Pt 3:4).

The enigma of the existence of evil demands an explanation. The evangelist gives it with a parable of Jesus.

The first character in the scene is the owner. He represents God. He is the one who sows or in any event, the one responsible of the quality of the seed, defined as "good" (v. 24). This is not a mundane adjective. It explicitly recalls the refrain that is repeated ten times in the first chapter of Genesis: "And God saw that it was good." Everything that God has done was good: not in the sense that cataclysms and natural disasters did not happen, that there was no pain, sickness and death, but it was all good because it perfectly suited to fulfill the plans of the Lord.

Creation is good as the seed of the word announced by Jesus is good.

The second character is the enemy. He represents the logic of this world, the anti-evangelical

mentality. He comes at night and, while everyone is asleep, sowing tares, a kind of weed very similar to grain. It grows to a height of 60 cm and produces an ear containing blackish grains; its roots are intertwined with those of the wheat and are impossible to eradicate without tearing that too.

It is when the minds are numbed from sleep, when vigilance is loosened, when one abandons oneself to dissipation and frivolity that the enemy finds a way to hack into the field to sow evil. An oversight is enough and one ends up adapting to current morality. The principles of this world is assimilated. It is not easy, at first, to become aware of what happened. Evil, in fact, often disguises itself as “an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). Later on, when one looks at the results, he becomes aware of the germ of death that penetrated into the minds and hearts. That's why Paul advises: "You know what hour it is. This is the time to awake for our salvation is now, nearer than when we first believed. The night is almost over and the day is at hand" (Rom 13:11-12).

The third character are the servants. We find them amiable because they represent us. Their reaction—a mixture of astonishment and bewilderment in finding the presence of the darnel—is what we experience when we realize the existence of evil in the world, in the Christian community, in every person. The exciting dialogue with the master is moving. It shows their interest in the field, their commitment to production. They do not seem strangers but family members.

It is at this point that the central message of the parable is inserted: their passion for the cause of good involves them to the point of proposing a reckless action. They are taken by impatience, anxiety of immediately getting rid of the darnel. They have no hesitation; they want an immediate and strong intervention.

The owner does not lose control; he keeps calm. He is not surprised of the incident. He is not moved and does not share their restlessness. The perspective of God is represented in his answer (which occupies more than a third of the story). In this world, good and evil are not separated. They are destined to grow together until the end.

Why can't the times be speeded up? If God is almighty why does he not immediately eliminate every trace of evil?

He is not omnipotent perhaps as we imagine. The Bible never gives him this title. It calls him powerful (Lk 1:49) or pantokrator (Rev 1:8), which does not mean "one who can do what he wants," but "the one to whom nothing gets out of hand." Man is free and God wanted to start with him "a love story" from which he could also come out defeated. His project contemplates the presence of evil, which must be serenely accepted, as a component of life. Believing that he is pantokrator means feeding the belief that he will cleverly lead this "love story" with every person and that the last, decisive and winning word, however, will be his.

The presence of weeds in us than in others enormously irks. It costs us to admit that "there is no righteous man on earth who always does good and never sins" (Ecl 7:20). We would like to lull ourselves in the illusion of being perfect. We would like to have a confirmation of the high image that we have made of ourselves. Evil is not to be justified, of course, but Jesus urges us to consider it with the calm and patient eyes of God.

The amazing growth of the kingdom of heaven (vv. 31-35).

In the parable of the wheat and the weeds other two short ones follow. They are called “twins” because they contain the same message: the disproportion between the small beginning and the unexpected, amazing final result. A grain of mustard seed, almost invisible, gives rise to a shrub that can reach four feet in height; a few grams of yeast makes fifty pounds of flour rise. The contrast is enormous.

It's not the invited who enjoys the present prestige and foretastes the future triumphs of the church, which began with a group of unskilled fishermen and impure, sinful people. It became a respected, feared, appreciated, able to be noticed and prevailing structure. It's not even an announcement of the progressive and relentless Christianization of the whole world.

As the preceding parable urged for patience and trust, these two are an invitation for optimism arising from the certainty that in the Spirit and the word of Christ—although insignificant in the eyes of the world—the irresistible force of God is present.

The evangelist concludes the three parables with a reflection on the goal which Jesus wanted to achieve: to unveil God's project for the world since the moment of creation (vv. 34-35).

The serene acceptance of evil does not mean disengagement (vv 36-43).

The scene changes. Jesus is no longer on the boat, but at home. He does not turn to the crowd, but to the small group of disciples. It is the evangelist's way of introducing the application of the parable.

Reading these verses one can notice that the situation it refers to is completely changed: the characters are no longer the same; the parable becomes an allegory; the seed is not the logic of the kingdom, and the tares the opposite, but they seem to be the good and bad individuals; the field is not the world, but the reign of the Son of man; the message, above all, is not the same: first the master invited servants to accept with serenity the existence of evil next to the good. Then he scolded the servants' intolerance. Now he seems to let himself be taken up by the frenzy of "putting hands to the fire" (v. 42).

This is—as we revealed—a catechesis addressed to the community of Matthew at the end of the first century. Probably, after the first few decades of great fervor, the Christians were a bit more relaxed and did not take seriously the commitments of their baptism. What to do? The evangelist felt the need to shake them, to recall them to the seriousness of life. He did so using the language of the preachers of his time. He was a Jew, spoke to the Jews, and to make himself understood he could only resort to images comprehensible to his people: fire, the fiery furnaces, weeping, gnashing of teeth, the harvest, the angels, the devils. These awesome metaphors, commonly used by the rabbis, cannot be repeated today without adding any necessary explanations.

It's not correct to extract from them conclusions regarding the end of the world and the judgment of God. Matthew was not giving information. He did not intend to describe what will happen to sinners in the future, but was addressing an urgent, heartfelt call to his Christians.

One thing is certain: whoever does evil, ruins his life. As for the future, more than making the allegories (where clearly the eastern fertile imagination took over) absolute, it is better to dwell on

what the Holy Scripture explicitly says that God is father “who wants all to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4). “He did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but through him the world is to be saved” (Jn 3:17).

And what about the fire? God knows a single fire: his Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:3), handed over by the Risen Lord on Easter Sunday as a destructive force of sin (Jn 20:22-23). It is the fire alluded to by Jesus: "I have come to bring fire upon the earth and how I wish it were already kindled" (Lk 12:49). It is the unstoppable flame that will burn—this is the good news—all traces of weeds in the heart of every person, leaving only the good grain, the only one that will be admitted in the future world.

At the time of harvest "all the scandals and operators of iniquity" will be collected and thrown into the fiery furnace. It 's not a threat of punishment, but a good announcement: the fire of God, His Spirit will one day wipe out all forms of evil. In the kingdom of heaven, now in its completion, there will not be anyone doing iniquity.

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