

Commentary to 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

The more convinced “yes” passes through a “no”

Introduction



There are

people who answer yes without having understood. There are also sincere people who say no because they are not convinced and want to understand better. Their 'no' is just a polite way to ask for explanation and to say that they want to see thing more clearly. Whoever immediately answers 'yes' to God perhaps does not realize who He is, what He thinks and proposes.

Whoever produces is appreciated in our society. The old, the sick, the disabled are respected, loved, helped, but are often felt as a burden. The perception of their value and the preciousness of their contribution to making our world more humane is not immediate. We reward the efficient and the capable. We esteem those who are able to succeed by themselves and we remunerate those who work. God instead starts from the last, is interested of the last, privileges and rewards the last. Freely.

The parable of last Sunday has shocked us and perhaps, during the week, we reflected on the inconsistency of the master's behavior. He pays the last hour workers as the first ones. It is difficult to give up the religion of merits and believe in gratuitous love of God. Today's reading seems to respond to our objections: "You say Yahweh's way is not just! Why Israel, is my position wrong? Is it not rather that yours is wrong?" (v. 25).

Saying yes to God means giving up one's own thoughts and accepting his. He does not look for the satiated, but those who are hungry to fill them of his possessions (Lk 1:53). He does not appreciate the powerful who sit on thrones, but lowers himself to raise the lowly (Lk 1:52). He does not reward the righteous for their own merits, but makes himself companion of the weak and introduces the tax collectors and prostitutes first in the kingdom. Only those who recognize themselves as last, sinners and in need of his help will experience the joy of being saved.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"The Lord teaches his ways to the humble, the poor and the sinners."

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First Reading: Ezekiel 18:25-28

What did the deportees in Babylon talk about if not the destruction of their city and those responsible for the catastrophe? They racked their brain but they always came to the same conclusion: we are victims of the mistakes made by others. Our fathers have sinned and we carry the consequences and, like a refrain, they kept repeating the proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ez 18:2).

The predictions for the future were bleak. They were far from Jerusalem, without the holy place, the temple in which they could beg the Lord's forgiveness and offer sacrifices of atonement for sins. They felt ruined and had lost all hope.

Among these deportees there was also Ezekiel, who took a stand against the widespread belief among the people. It's true –he said– that there is a solidarity in evil. It is true that the consequences of sin can reach not only those who commit it, but also involve the innocent. They extend themselves sometimes for generations, but it is not an inescapable fate. It is possible to break this chain and everyone is asked

to give his contribution to engrain a change of course to history. The one who drops his arms, who resigns oneself cannot blame the parents. The responsibility falls on him who acts cowardly, "he dies because of his sins" (v. 26).

Deliverance from sin is not obtained by performing rituals. It is useless to repeat: "At this time, we no longer have a king, prophet or leader. We cannot offer holocausts, sacrifices, offerings or incense. We have no place to present to you the first fruits of our crops, and so obtain your favor" (Dan 3:38). The sad legacy of sin is cleared with conversion: "The one who does what is good and right after turning from the sins he committed, he will save his life" (v. 27).

Ezekiel's message is comforting: man's no to God is always fraught with consequences, but it is not definitive. It is never the last word. At any time it can become a yes: "He will live and not die because he has opened his eyes and turned from the sins he had committed" (v. 28).

Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

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 21:28-32

The land promised by God to his people is not just "flowing with milk and honey," but also one in which wheat, oil and wine abound ... (Dt 8:6.10). "On that day, you will invite one another under your

vines and fig trees” was the dream cultivated by every Israelite (Zech 3:10).

In a time like ours where everything is mechanized, attention is paid only to the quantity of the products and their commercial value. To talk about a loving relationship with one’s own vineyard would sound a bit naive and pathetic. It was not so in Israel. While he pruned, the peasant caressed, with the moving gaze of a lover, his own vineyard and addressed it with sweet and tender words. The poets have sung often this love and God used it to describe the passion that binds him to his people (Is 5:1-7). Israel is “my fruitful vineyard. Praise her! I, Yahweh, am its keeper; I water it every moment. So that no one will harm it, day and night I guard it” (Is 27:2-3).

Jesus has taken this several times: he spoke of posted workers, in diverse hours, to work in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-15), of the murderous tenants who do not want to deliver the fruits (Mt 21:33-40) and especially he presented himself as the "true vine" (Jn 15:1-8).

The parable of today's gospel depicts three characters: a father and two sons.

Jesus' hearers sensed immediately that the father represents God, but they are surprised by the fact that he has two sons. The Son of God is only one, Israel; through the prophet Hosea, the Lord said: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1) and to the Pharaoh he said: "Israel is my firstborn son" (Ex 4:22). The Scripture says that only "the Jews are children of the Most High God" (Est 8,12q), "children that will not disappoint" (Is 63:8). To hear about the two sons of God is disconcerting for an Israelite; but it is only the beginning, the continuation of the parable is even more provocative.

At the invitation of his father to go to work in the vineyard, the firstborn zealously and readily answered: Yes, sir (literally: I, sir!; like saying, do not think of others, I'm here!), but then did not go (v. 30). He does not say that, for listlessness or being seduced by an attractive proposition of friends, "he changed his mind." No, even when he had said yes, he was not at all in accord with the program of his father. He had only spoken words, empty words.

It recalls another saying of Jesus: “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my heavenly Father” (Mt 7:21).

This firstborn evidently represents the Israelites whom Moses had already called "degenerate children, a deceitful and crooked generation", "unfaithful children" (Dt 32:5,20). Not all the Israelites, of course, but those who, in words, had committed themselves to the covenant and then had reduced them to external rites, worthless ceremonies, convinced that they are right with the Lord because they offered sacrifices and burnt offerings, prayers. This, at the time of Jesus, was the religion practiced by the priests of the temple and the notables of the people. They did not produce the fruits willed by God: "He looked for justice, but found bloodshed; he looked for righteousness, but heard cries of distress" (Is 5:7). The solemn liturgies were leaves, not fruits (Mt 21:18-22).

The provocations of the parable are not over. The father turned to the second son the request to go to work in the vineyard and the answer was: "I don't want to." But then, overcame with remorse, he went (v. 29).

The allusion to the hated Gentiles—who are now elevated to the status of children—is explicit. They have not given any formal adherence to the will of the Lord, but they entered first in the kingdom of God.

When Matthew wrote this passage fifty years have passed since the death and resurrection of Christ

and the prophecy has already been realized: the Christian communities were composed mainly of former pagans, while the majority of the children of Abraham, who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah of God, did not enter in the vineyard.

This finding may lead to the dangerous illusion that these two children are of the prehistoric characters and have nothing to do with us. Christians would be the "third son," the one who says yes and does the will of the Father. They profess a clear faith and are free from theological errors. They commit themselves to observing the commandments and precepts and praising the Lord with songs and prayers.

But let's ask ourselves what impact have our formulas, our statements, our formal stand, our rituals in everyday life (Go to work today in the vineyard!)? Do they put an end to hatred, wars, abuses? While continuing to profess ourselves Christians, do we not easily resign ourselves to a life of compromise? Don't we perhaps adapt to the criteria of this world and the good sense of people? Don't we live perhaps with injustice, inequality, discrimination?

The third child exists, but we are not that child. Only "the Son of God, Jesus Christ—Paul writes—was not "yes" and "no," but with him it was simply yes. "In him all the promises of God have come to be a yes" (2 Cor 1:19). He is the one who always said: "Yes, Father, this was your gracious will" (Mt 11:26).

The conclusion of the parable (vv. 31b-32) contains what is perhaps the most provocative statement of Jesus: "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are ahead of you in the kingdom of God." The verb is in the present; it is a fact: the public sinners who have no religious screen to hide themselves, those who cannot pretend because their condition is obvious to everyone, even to themselves, are at an advantage compared to those who consider themselves righteous. These feel safe and protected by the religious practices that they fulfill faithfully without even realizing of their distance from the vineyard of the Lord.

"The publicans and the harlots" who know they are far from God do not delude themselves of doing his will. They are conscious of having said no; they do not try to fool themselves by fulfilling the precepts they themselves invented. They do not soothe the conscience with practices that have nothing in common with the true religion. Their awareness of being poor, weak, sinners in need of help, predisposes them to be first in receiving God's gift.

The other brother will enter the vineyard when he stops to acknowledge himself just, when he renounces the pride of those who believe their good works, when he recognizes his own hypocrisy and experiences disgust, when abandons the certainties that arise from the fact that he had always said yes to words and will rejoice at being saved by the gratuitous love of the Father.