

Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2009

There exists in each one of us an inborn instinct to repulse anything that is unfamiliar to us. Such an instinct, which appears at first glance as an expression of human prudence, can lead sometimes to intolerance, discrimination, and exclusion. Today's readings invite us to meditate on the phenomenon of intolerance due to religious motivation and its effects on the domain of social justice.

The first reading describes the situation of Israel in the aftermath of the liberation from Egypt. At that time, as Moses was overwhelmed with the leadership over Israel, God enjoined him to find some relief by appointing seventy elders who could help him as judges over Israel.

In order for these to operate efficiently, God bestowed upon them some of the spirit that was given to Moses. All seventy elders got the charism that was given to Moses and started prophesying. Two of them who were not present at the gathering received also the spirit in the same way as the others.

At that time Joshua, the assistant to Moses, protested and wanted to stop the two because they were not with the others. On the contrary, Moses rebuked him by denouncing his jealousy. For Moses, it would be a good thing that all the people of God be prophets and be filled with his spirit.

What this text teaches us is that God is without discrimination. He gives his gifts and talents to each one according to his bounty and even outside the established structures. If we could only be happy for what our fellows have received from God and tolerate each other, how wonderful life would be. The "ghetto mentality", instead of contributing to our human and spiritual growth, is detrimental to our unity and a peaceful coexistence among us.

This point is exactly what Jesus brings in the Gospel. As John was complaining about someone who was driving out demons in his name without being of the group, Jesus prohibited preventing him. For Jesus, no one can perform mighty deeds in his name and at the same time speak ill of him.

Here Jesus gives us a lesson of humility, modesty and tolerance toward others. He invites us to learn to see God's Spirit at work whenever we meet good people even if they do not belong to our Church. Whoever acts rightly according to one's conscience is for Jesus, even anonymously. In that sense, we should love and respect every conscientious person no matter how different he or she might be.

We should also remember that the truth is always bigger than any individual's grasp of it. No one can completely grasp the whole truth. In that perspective, the basis for the principle of tolerance is not a lazy acceptance that there is truth everywhere, but rather the recognition that Jesus himself is the truth. With regard to all that, intolerance would be a sign of both arrogance and ignorance, because it is a sign that people believe there is no truth beyond the truth they see.

This does not mean that we have to renounce the truth we hold in catholic tradition. On the contrary, we recognize that a ray of truth and much goodness are found everywhere. This being said, if people are spreading erroneous doctrines in order to destroy morality and the foundations of Christian civilization, they must be combated. However, the way of combating them should never be to eliminate them by force or weapons, but to prove to them that they are wrong. In other words, we may hate a person's opinion or belief, but we must never hate the person. As the French

Writer Voltaire wrote once, “I hate what you say”; but I would die for your right to say it”.

Because Jesus is the truth that gives us eternal salvation, anyone who does good in his name will receive a reward. It means that any kindness shown, any help given to the people of Christ will always receive a reward. Why shall we help? The reason is that because that person belongs to Jesus. Anyone in need has claim upon us because of our belonging to Jesus. This is one of the foundations of the social doctrine of the Church, namely that we have an obligation toward the needy among us because of Jesus.

Anyway, if Jesus were still physically on earth, he would certainly have helped anyone in need. Therefore, as his disciples, we continue his work and mission by caring for our brothers and sisters who are in need. By doing so, we give evident testimony of our belonging to Jesus. What is asked of us is not great things, but the smallest ones, as in giving a cup of water. A cup of water stands for the simplest things anyone can do on a daily basis in the name of Jesus.

If being a disciple of Jesus means to do good to others and to win a reward, then, to cause a weak brother or sister to stumble is to harm them and, therefore, to win our eternal punishment. In other words, to sin is a bad thing but to teach others to sin is terribly worse. That is why the expression to cut off the hand or the foot, or to pluck out the eye aims at the integrity of our action, the cleanness of our movement and the decency of our look. Everything we do should be perfect and pure so that we do not bring others into sin.

Because, as disciples of Jesus, we are called to do good to others, then the question of social justice becomes important for us. All that explains why St James is harsh with the rich who exploit the poor. He warns them that if they do not give to their workers their due wages and cheat on them, they run a big risk. A day will come where their gold and silver will rust. That rust and corrosion are proof of the impermanence and the no-value of earthly things. Therefore, any rich person who does not play a fair game with the poor will finish in condemnation.

There is more: anyone who chooses this way of conduct chooses also its end. Such a person is like a fattened cow. The end of a fattened cow is that it will be one day slaughtered for some feast. And those who have chosen to live in selfishness, without any regard for social justice, are like men who have fattened themselves for the day of judgment. Selfishness always leads to the destruction of the soul.

Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us take seriously these words of warning and work for social justice. Like Moses, may we recognize our limits in things we do and ask the help we need. Finally, let us ask the Lord to give us the courage to recognize the gifts and talents of our brothers and sisters, to thank him for their presence in our midst for the good of the whole body of Christ. May God bless you all!

Numbers 11, 25-29; James 5, 1-6; Mark 9, 38-43, 45, 47-48



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