

Jesus Christ the King A/2011

The readings of this Sunday invite us to reflect on the kingship of Jesus. They also invite us to reflect on our own leadership and on the way we let God guide us for the sake of our eternal salvation and the wellbeing of our fellow humans.

The first reading of the book of Ezekiel is written against the background of the bad leaders of Israel. Because these have failed in their role of leadership, God himself will take the direction of his people. Like a good shepherd, he will rescue his sheep from every place where they were scattered. He will pasture them and care for them.

What is behind this text is the idea that where human shepherds become bad leaders, God steps in order to assure solicitude and care for his people. In that sense, God is not only a good provider, but also a defender of justice and upholder of the weak. That is why his leadership is that of concern for the wellbeing of every one, whether they are lost, sick, injured, strayed, rich or poor, etc. Another insight is the idea that because God knows his sheep so well, he is able to pronounce a right judgment on them all.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus talks about the last judgment. In fact, at the end of time, the Son of man will sit on his throne and gather all the nations of the earth before him. He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the flock in order to distinguish the sheep from the goats. He will select the good from the bad and pronounce a judgment on them all. The criterion of judgment will not be based on big actions, but rather on how they were loving, compassionate and charitable toward one another.

What do we learn from this Gospel? First of all, there is something about the sin of omission. In fact, in the Confiteor at the Mass, we say that "I have sinned in what I have done and in what I failed to do". What we fail to do in our capacity as disciples of Jesus constitutes the drama that is happening in this parable. Second, there is the reality of final judgment. Many times people say that because Jesus is so merciful and forgiving, it is difficult to conceive of the last judgment as punishment. The truth, however, is that a parable like this opens our eyes so that we must not be blind to the reality of a possible judgment at the end of our life, if we do not live according to the will of God.

If that is true, what will be the criteria of judgment? The criteria will be the law of love and the ability to decode the image of God hidden in our fellows. In fact, it is striking to realize in the Gospel that people are not judged on account of great things they have done or have failed to do, but rather on simple gestures of charity and solidarity, like giving a meal to the hungry, providing a drink to the thirsty, offering clothes to the naked, or welcoming a stranger or visiting the sick or the prisoner.

These are very simple, but concrete acts. Those who performed them were surprised to learn that while they did them for their fellows, it was for Jesus, the Son of Man. In the same way, those who did not perform them for their fellows were surprised to learn that they did not do it for Jesus. Given all that, it is absolutely clear that Jesus is hidden in our fellows. In that sense, our problem today becomes that of decoding the image of Jesus hidden in the needy.

The decoding of the image of Jesus is our task today, because anytime we help someone in need, it is Jesus we care for. Anytime we withhold our help toward a needy

person, it is against Christ. Moreover, because we are the disciples of Jesus, we have become in the world his hands, his eyes, his ears, his mouth and his heart. Jesus reaches out to the poor and the needy through us. It is our duty and our mission to serve him by serving our fellows in need.

This is a tricky mission, because we live in a culture that has appropriated Christian signs and values, like charity, solidarity, sharing, and has given them a political connotation. In that sense, we become afraid to talk about charity and solidarity with the poor and the needy, lest we are seen as playing the game of welfare, proper to socialism. We have to be careful and to defend ourselves and our Christian values. We should not be intimidated to be who we are as disciples of Jesus, the master of charity.

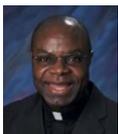
What is the consequence of all this? The consequence is that we cannot only care for our spirituality or our individual devotions, or our personal holiness. We should also care for the poor and the needy, how we can share our blessings with them. There is nothing wrong with that. Does it mean that we have to stop our spiritual exercises for the benefit of charity? No. We should pursue all our spiritual devotions, but without neglecting the works of charity.

How shall our charity be? According to the parable, the only way our charity toward the poor and the needy will be efficient is when it is anonymous, unselfish and without calculation. In that sense, the help that wins the heart of God is that which is given for nothing and which is done just for the sake of helping someone in need. In fact, those who helped people in need did not think at all they were helping Christ, and yet they were accumulating their eternal reward. In the same way, those who withheld the help to their fellows did not think, either, that they were closing their heart to Jesus. In the end, the first were full of good surprise, while the last were full of bitter regret.

All this comes just to one point: the building of the kingdom of Jesus on earth is done through service to our fellows in need. That is why anytime we do good to others because of our faith, we build Jesus' kingdom. If we forget the practice of charity, we run the risk of being left out of the kingdom. Moreover, we should be in the midst of the world his hands and his eyes, his mouth and his ears. We should always act toward our fellows with the feeling that was in him.

It is only this way that we can share in his resurrection as he shared in our humanity in order to make us divine. As St Paul says, since Christ died and rose for our sake, we share also in his resurrection. As we have been in solidarity with Adam, the first man, from whom death came into the world, so we are in solidarity with the risen Christ from whom God brought back life to us. May he teach us how to be good leaders over our families! May we strive to be part of his kingdom by our life of charity toward the needy and the poor! May God bless you all!

Ezekiel 34: 11-12, 15-17; 1 Corinthians 15: 20-26, 28; Matthew 25: 31-46



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