

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Deuteronomy 4:1-2.6-8 / Mark 7:1-8.14-15. 21-23)
30.02.2015

Their hearts are far from me

Dear brothers and sisters,

In today's gospel passage, we heard Jesus lamenting: "**Their hearts are far from me**". Jesus was speaking of the hearts of the scribes and the Pharisees of his time. But if we are honest, we have to recognize that it happens that our own hearts, mine and yours, are far from the Lord. The consequence is that our worship can be reduced to lip-service; our life of faith to a following of so-called religious practices which in fact are only external behaviours. In other words, we go through the motions of religion but our hearts are not in them.

When Jesus speaks of **the heart**, he does not speak of an organ of our body: namely the cardiac muscle; he does not speak of the feelings with which we respond to another person, nor yet of the superficial emotion we call sentimentality. The heart, according to Jesus and more widely according to the Bible, is something which lies much deeper within us. It is the innermost core of our being, the root of our existence, the place where we meet with the Lord. It is the place inhabited by our conscience wherein we make our life choices and take our decisions.

What does Jesus mean when he says that **our hearts are far from Him**? Jesus wants to draw our attention to the fact that we are no longer living with Him who dwells within our hearts, and consequently that we are not living to the full with ourselves. After all, we believe that to live to the full is to live with Christ. When Jesus says that our hearts are far from Him, He does not necessarily say that we are not seeking Him, but that, if we are seeking Him, we are seeking Him in the wrong place. We are all somewhat like the great St Augustine who passed the first part of his life seeking God everywhere, in studies and in the pleasures of life, when in fact God was waiting for him within Himself. In his Confessions, Augustine wrote these famous lines:

"Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you!

For behold you were within me, and I outside;

and I sought you outside

and in my ugliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made.

You were within me and I was not with you".

Yes, the truth is that the Lord lives within our hearts. More precisely, **the three persons of the Most Holy Trinity live within our hearts.**

Since our birth, the Spirit of life, which is one of the names of the **Holy Spirit**, is present and breathing within us. The Holy Spirit is the communion of love which unites the Father and the Son.

So we have in our hearts the Spirit of the Son, the Spirit of Jesus who does not cease to pray to the Father in a way which pleases Him and who invites us to make his prayer our own. Following the rhythm of our breathing, our breathing-in and our breathing-out, the Spirit does not cease to murmur within us "Abba-Father". This is the basic prayer which inhabits us from the day of our birth until the day of our death.

The Spirit is also the Spirit of the Father who communicates his will to us through his Son Jesus, the Word of God made flesh.

But it is not only the Holy Spirit who lives within us. We know that **the Father and the Son** have also established their dwelling within us;

the Father, who created us out of love and looks at each one of us as his beloved child, dwells within us.

And Jesus, the only Son, in whom we became adoptive children of the Father and who offers us a share in his victory over sin and death, also dwells within us.

Obviously, God is omnipresent. We can find Him in nature, in a church, in the sacred Scriptures, in the sacraments, in the Christian community, in every person or event. But today's gospel passage invites us to think about God dwelling within our hearts. Our vocation is to welcome the Lord's presence within us, to abide in Him as He abides in us, to remain in his presence. Our vocation is to seek the face of the Lord, and to seek the Lord's will in order to do it. Our vocation is to acknowledge the presence and the action of God within us and allow Him to work within us. Our vocation is to awaken ourselves more and more to "the inner life": to God's presence within our hearts. The call is to a reciprocal relationship between the Lord and ourselves.

Very often, instead of being attentive to the Lord's presence within us and seeking to do his will, we prefer, like the scribes and the Pharisees of today's gospel passage, to give ourselves religious regulations and observances. An example: I don't eat sweets during Lent. We decide what the Lord's will is, what he is waiting from us. This is a way to give ourselves security by remaining in control. It is a way of giving ourselves good conscience at a low price.

Reasoning like this, we seek to save ourselves by our works instead of welcoming salvation as a gift from the Lord. The truth is that we cannot save ourselves by our observances and our human regulations

When we take our salvation into our own hands, we not only reduce our spiritual life to a list of external observances, we also readily judge others assessing their ability to fulfil or not all these observances we are adhering to. What we are called to is to live freely in the presence of the Lord, following his life-giving way. The invitation addressed to us is to look at ourselves and others as temples of the Blessed Trinity.

All who were baptised in Christ are invited to keep their **hearts pure**. We do that by remaining attentive to the presence of the Lord, for He is the one who was the pure in heart par excellence. The call is to live in communion with Him who lives within us. Then, we are led to live our daily lives according to the Lord's will, following his guidance.

However, if we don't pay attention to the presence of the Lord within our hearts, then evil intentions invade our hearts and take the Lord's place within us. The result is that we are led to commit "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly".

Let us be clear: fulfilling human regulations and external observances cannot make us pure; not fulfilling them cannot make us unclean. Purity or uncleanness comes from our hearts and not from human regulations and external observances. Purity or uncleanness of our hearts comes from our awareness of and docility to the Lord who dwells within us.

Let us ask the Lord for the grace to live within our hearts, the grace to live in his presence and to follow his ways, guided by his inspirations. May human regulations and external observances give way to works of mercy inspired by the Lord, works of mercy which are icons of the love of the Lord for his people.