

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

(Isaiah 6:1-8 / Luke 5:1-11)

07.02.2016

*Sin & Love*

“I am a sinful man.”

Simon Peter’s words ring true. They apply to all of us. We are sinners. Not only do we commit sins but, more deeply, there is something in us which prevents our inner compass from being always God-orientated and which leads us astray.

However the apostle is utterly wrong when he adds: “Leave me Lord”. It is precisely because he is a sinner that he needs Christ. Christ alone can prevent him and all of us, when we confess our sins, from falling into despair, self-depreciation or self-harm. Without Christ guilt and shame distort the image we have of ourselves to the point where we become unable to discern the way forward, how to move on; guilt and shame suck life out of us and keep us in the dark. The acknowledgement of our sins is a good thing only if it is surrounded by Christ’s merciful, caring and healing light.

Only Christ can make us realise that we are defined neither by our achievements nor by our failures, we are neither our great deeds nor our sins. God’s love, personal and unconditional love for each one of us gives us our truest identity and helps us to relate in a just way to our sins and to our achievements.

It is strange how, in our Churches, in our preaching and in our sacramental practice we have been very much focused on sins, on the fact that we are sinners and that we need to be reminded of it regularly. This attitude may have sown in some minds the wrong idea that the confession of sins is the condition imposed for God to love us and a pre-requisite for his presence and proximity.

In our Gospel reading, we see that Jesus’ presence to Simon Peter precedes the apostle’s confession. We must be clear that to say “I am a sinner” is not the magic formula which opens God’s heart or appeases a wrathful Father. Things happen precisely the other way round: because we know that we are loved we are able to freely and truly confess our sins.

Jesus’ reaction to Simon Peter’s words is interesting. He does not brush them aside in a condescending or paternalistic way, but he does not dwell on them either.

In fact Jesus does with Peter what most of us would find difficult to do: he entrusts a mission to sinful Peter. Our reluctance to trust people who have failed or who have committed a sin may be considered sometimes a sign of wisdom but most of the time it is a refusal or an inability to look at people in the way the Lord looks at them: with hope. Moreover it may provide an opportunity for us to play God the judge, and to do so standing on high moral ground, saying to ourselves that we have not failed, we are trustworthy.

It seems to me that, consciously or unconsciously, we may be driven by a black and white mentality: on one hand there are the public sinners, those everybody is able to name, those who do not fit with the moral criteria of the group, those whose exclusion will reinforce the cohesion and identity of the group, those who may challenge our ways and then on the other hand there are us, the law-abiding, the daily communicants. Yes we may acknowledge that we are sinners but we sin in a more discreet and acceptable way, we are politically-correct sinners.

The problem with this kind of reasoning is that it is not the Lord’s. As we have already noticed, in his dealing with Peter, what matters most for Jesus is not that the apostle

is a sinner or that, later on, he will betray him. Jesus is not a guru whose goal is to create a community of pure and clean people, a kind of sectarian church, non-contaminated by the sins of the world. Jesus knows that we are sinners and that we will always fall short of our calling. The test of our spiritual growth is not that we become sinless – this will never happen. What we must grasp is that spiritual progress has no other test in the end, nor any better expression, than our ability to love.

It is important to acknowledge our sins, to diagnose where the sickness is, yet good doctors would not want their patients to be focused on their sickness, rather they would prefer them to concentrate on, and to put all their energy into the healing process. For us the remedy against the sickness of sin and the goal of all our endeavours is love: real, caring and demanding love.

Today many Christians do not know what sins are, and when they think they know, many do not see the point of confessing them. It is a very sad situation and one of its causes may be that we have not stressed enough that a sin is not first the transgression of a law but the disruption of a loving relationship. To say “I am a sinner” is to acknowledge that sometimes I speak and behave in ways which hurt the relationship I have with God, with others and with myself.

From this point of view, the last dialogue between Jesus and Peter is very enlightening. The Lord does not ask the apostle: “What about your sins and betrayal? Are you going to do the same sort of thing again?” His question goes to the core to what it means to be a disciple: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (Jn 21:16)

Using the words of St John Paul II, it is important to be reminded that “we cannot live without love. If we do not encounter love, (...) our life is meaningless. Without love we remain incomprehensible to ourselves. Thus every one of us needs a vibrant relationship of love with the Lord, a profound loving union with Christ.” (*Things...*, p. 42)

The next time we find ourselves like St Paul and do not understand our own actions, because we fail to carry out the things we want to do, and we find ourselves doing the very things we hate (cf. Rm 7:15), let us remember that we are loved and that, for us, to turn to God and to acknowledge our sins “means being enfolded in a warm embrace: it is the embrace of the Father’s infinite mercy” (Pope Francis, General Audience, 19.02.2014).