

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Wisdom 2:12.17-20 / Mark 9:30-37)
20.09.2015

In the passage from the book of Wisdom that we have just heard, we find what could be considered as the most challenging statement about faith and about God: “If the virtuous man is God’s son, God will take his part and rescue him from the clutches of his enemies. Let us test him with cruelty and with tortures (...) since he will be looked after – we have his word for it”. The suffering of the just ones is used as the test of God’s love, their pain and trials are regarded as the proof that it is useless to believe in God.

These words do not reflect a one-off opinion in history, nor are they only pronounced by godless people and cynics. Men and women from all backgrounds have been puzzled and challenged by the fact that innocent people, supposedly protected by God, have been struck by sickness and trials, that good people have suffered injustice.

We may try to find a way out by imitating Job’s friends who suggested that Job’s trials were the result of God’s justice. Zophar said to Job: “Know that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves” (11:6). However God put things right and condemned Job’s so-called friends and their distorted theology.

The words of the godless in the book of Wisdom oblige us to face difficult questions: if the just one suffers as much, and sometimes more, than the guilty one, what is the point of having faith? Why do we believe in God? Why should we strive to be good and generous?

These questions stem partly from an innate sense of reward and justice present in our minds and hearts. This innate sense of reward and justice can easily produce a commercial mentality. It has us think that if we do something we can expect something in return. In our faith we can end up relating to God as we relate to a bank manager or a cash machine. Our generosity, our goodness are transformed into a kind of currency which we use to buy peace, good conscience, feel-good points, and prosperity.

The problem is that the reward of a loving relationship is the relationship itself and nothing else. The presence of the two lovers to one another and their love for one another is their reward. For St John of the Cross “it is clear that the soul which loves God seeks no other reward for its services other than to love God perfectly” (*Spiritual Canticle* St. 9).

Love is about giving and receiving not about taking and purchasing. This love is not just a pious dream or pie in the sky. It was made visible in Jesus Christ and, through the Spirit it is embodied in the Church.

However the questions remain: why be good and generous? Why be in relationship with God?

Having challenged our approach to the reward system which can be prevalent in our lives, these questions help us also to reflect on our identity.

A few weeks ago a man came to the guest house and shared his journey with me. Many years ago he was ordained as a priest and while he was enjoying his teaching ministry, he felt that, and I quote him, he “was not himself” and so he decided to leave the ministry. His words tackle one of our deepest longings and expectations: to be ourselves. In faith we believe that we are truly ourselves only in relationship with God, only when we allow his grace to shape us anew into his image and likeness. We are ourselves when we become Christlike, when we reclaim our identity as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

It is in our companionship with Jesus Christ, true man and true God, that we discover what it means to be a human being in relationship with God, what it means to be a son or a daughter in relationship with a father.

The first reward of our fellowship with Christ is not that we get something from him but that we become like him. We are good, generous, gentle, kind and respectful not because we want something from Christ, but because it is the best way for us to become like him.

And when we become like Christ, truly human, we are led to the cross. We have to realise that pain, loss and injustice are part of our humanity and that the only way for us to get through them – and sometimes to overcome them – is to be good, generous, loving and patient.

Good people suffer like any other people on earth, but their communion with Christ is their strength, love at work within them is stronger than death and allows them to win the crown of life.

After reward and identity, there is a third aspect which needs to be challenged: our vision, our ability, or rather our inability, to see.

In a society which has become very competitive, tough and quite cynical, what do we think when we see people who are gentle, patient, kind, generous, people who forgive and who encourage others?

It is very easy for us to cast doubts on the goodness of others and to dismiss those who do not look strong, self-assertive, efficient, and eager to climb up the ladder of society.

When Jesus says: “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all”, he invites us to live a complete conversion. He calls upon us to look at the world and at others not with the glasses of the world but with God’s very eyes and heart.

That the virtuous decide to cling to God, that they may find their happiness and blessedness in being poor, meek, merciful, pure in heart and persecuted for righteousness (cf. Mt 5:1-11) will always baffle and challenge us.

Because of its humility, some may decide to be blind to the power of love at work in so many men and women throughout the world. Confronted with so much suffering and injustice among Christians, they may consider that God is either sadistic or careless.

However, at the end, whether or not we believe in God, what will bring us to make peace with ourselves is not what God should have done or what he failed to do, but how we have lived our lives, whether or not we have loved.

When we will look back on all that we have done or said, ultimately love alone will give meaning to our lives. Our great achievements and our failures will fade before the small, faithful, discreet and perseverant acts of love that we have strived to accomplish.

At the end, the triumph of God’s love revealed in the life, sufferings, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ will be totally ours and then we will understand all things in the light of this amazing love.