

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Wisdom 12:13.16-19 / Matthew 13:24-43)
23.07.2023
Vigilance & Patience

In our Gospel reading Jesus warns us about two dangerous attitudes which threaten our personal lives and the lives of our communities.

The first is mentioned only in passing and Jesus does not insist on it. Yet it plays an important role in the parable heard today and in many parables in the Gospels so it seems to me that it can be useful for us to reflect on it. At the beginning of his parable, Jesus says: “While everybody was asleep the enemy came...”

To sleep is a necessary aspect of our lives, yet in the New Testament, it often has a negative connotation. In our Gospel reading, to sleep is associated with the work of the enemy. St Peter’s words fit with our story: “Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” (1P 5:8)

Here the call addressed to us is the call to vigilance and attention. We are supposed to be like God who, according to the psalmist, “neither slumbers nor sleeps” (121:4). Love keeps the Lord awake and attentive to what is happening in the lives of his people. Unlike the idols, God does not sleep (cf. 1Kgs 18:27).

We have to be vigilant, less lazy and complacent, more focused and disciplined. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, we are sentinels (cf. 62:6), and we are supposed to be ready to see and interpret what is happening in and around us.

“All we need is a vigilant spirit.” This saying of Abba Poemen, a 5th century desert father, is a strong statement of the centrality of vigilance in Christian spiritual life. In what does it consist? In the New Testament, vigilance is contrasted with drowsiness and defined as the sobriety of those who have a clearly-defined goal to pursue and who ‘keep their eyes open,’ knowing that if they are not vigilant they may be distracted from their goal. St Basil of Caesarea thought that the Christian’s specific identity consists precisely in being vigilant.

In the conclusion of his *Moral Rules*, he wrote: “What is it that defines the Christian? Keeping watch every day and hour and being ready to carry out perfectly what pleases God.”

When we lack vigilance, when we are not attentive, the enemy comes and sows seeds of discord and pride, of misunderstandings and divisions, then we are surprised and we stumble.

The second threat which is a direct consequence of our lack of vigilance and attention is impatience. Often when we make a mistake, fail or fall, our first reaction is to look for an easy solution, a quick fix; we think of only one thing: to repair the damage done without taking the time to discern what the core problem is and what might be the best move to make in order to deal with it properly.

The patience we are called to exercise is not a form of passive inaction or lazy procrastination. In the context of Jesus’ parable it is about using time wisely and acting at the right moment. Patience works for a result, for something which has to be done at the appropriate time.

Too often, in our personal lives and in the lives of our families and communities, major crises arise because we have not been vigilant enough in regard to what was happening in us and around us; or because we did not read with enough attention the early warning signs, the harbingers which came our way.

We have to be reminded that to make important decisions without taking the time to discern or to make no decision in the hope that somebody will do it for us or that things will magically turn out the right way is highly irresponsible and dangerous. It is the best recipe for disaster.

Patience is about searching the truth with humility and perseverance, it is about engaging oneself on the delicate process of owning one's life and growing in love of God, of others and of oneself, it is about visiting courageously the recesses of our hearts and sowing therein seeds of forgiveness for one's own mistakes and the mistakes of others.

By our baptism we have become prophets. In the Bible the prophet is someone whose eyes are clear and uncovered (cf. Num 24:3-4). We are not faithful to our prophetic calling when we are not careful, when we fall asleep and wake up in a panic only when a crisis is upon us.

It is worth noticing that, in our Gospel reading, the owner of the field did not seem very surprised by the presence of the dandelion. He knew from experience that problems, difficulties and challenges are part of life.

Yet the owner was ready, equipped with vigilance and patience and so he was able to fight the good fight, and not only that, he was able to win the battle and to finish the race (cf. 2Tim 4:7).

None of us can expect to go through life without struggles and suffering, this is why we have to "learn where there is wisdom, where there is strength" (Ba 3:14). And there should be no doubt for you and me that our strength is not in inattention, drowsiness, impatience and hasty actions.

Our strength lies, as the Lord declares, in trust (cf. Is 30:15), in vigilant and patient trust. May we make ours St Paul's words: "I know the one in whom I have put my trust (...). The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom." (2Tim 1:12; 4:18)