

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) – 26.01.2014

(Isaiah 8:23-9:3 / Matthew 4:12-23)

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Conversion & Repentance

Both the evangelists Mark and Matthew agree on the fact that the content of Jesus' first preaching was a call to repentance and conversion.

It appears clearly that for Jesus the starting point of his mission is that humanity, each one of us needs to undergo, a radical change. Left to ourselves we are on the wrong track. We are disorientated and lost. Using the words of the prophet Isaiah, we live in darkness, we dwell in the land and shadow of death.

This diagnostic may sound a bit sombre. Thankfully, Jesus describes himself as a doctor who is coming to visit the sick, not the healthy. Whether we are ready to acknowledge it or not, the reality is that there is something terribly amiss in our world and in our lives. The Good News for you and me is that, freely and generously, Jesus gives us his light, his healing grace in order to restore our lives and to put us back on track.

We should not however consider conversion and repentance as a way for us to pay the bill for Jesus' consultation and treatment. We simply cannot buy God's grace. To repent is our way of allowing Jesus to touch us; it is to open the door of our lives so that the Lord may come in and accomplish his work within us freely.

In the Bible, repentance and conversion are like the two sides of one coin. While repentance is about change, conversion is about return. The two aspects are closely intertwined, one cannot occur without the other. It is expressed clearly in the Acts of the Apostles when St Paul informs King Agrippa that the goal of his preaching to the Gentiles is that they "repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance" (Ac 26:20).

It seems that our familiarity with Jesus' call to conversion and repentance has blunted its sharpness and impact on our lives. Do we really feel that we have to repent? Are we, are our communities, no longer in need of conversion?

Sometimes we may express our sorrow for a particular sin but what about the deep orientation of our lives?

Maybe part of the problem lies in the fact that we are satisfied with our Christian identity and we leave conversion and repentance for great sinners, those whose lives are visibly and publicly at odds with good moral standards.

It should be clear to all of us that our Christian identity is not something we receive naturally at birth, or from family, or school or because we live in a supposedly Christian country. Family, school and country may help us but ultimately, our Christian identity is a gift from God which requires our personal assent. We have to welcome Jesus in our hearts in a personal way: we need to enter into a committed relationship with him. This is the first and most important step of conversion of our human lives. This is what we witness in our Gospel when Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John who leave everything "at once and follow him".

And yet that is not all. Conversion and repentance are not only about great decisions, major challenges, and radical changes. In fact the real test of our Christian identity is in the small conversions we have to undertake every day. Our Christian identity is shaped by the way we deal with the constant challenges we meet in our families, in our communities, at our workplace. Regularly we have to make the choice between light and darkness, between reflecting Christ's light or casting a dark shadow.

Obviously, the world is not simply black and white, except in really unusual circumstances, we neither walk in full light nor in complete darkness. Normally we are in grey areas, we walk in a certain dimness. And yet, with Christ's light, each time we choose what is more in conformity with the Gospels, each time we allow the Spirit to convert and evangelise our way of thinking and seeing things then a spark of God's eternal and loving light is thrown into the darkness of our messy world.

Conversion and repentance are not reserved for the few in exceptional cases, they must pervade all the areas of our lives on a daily basis. What we are promoting here is not a miserable, guilt ridden way of living. On the contrary, the point is that with God, everything is possible. Every day, every hour, he gives us an opportunity to begin anew, to change, and to grow to our full stature as his beloved sons and daughters.

In our lives, while we may feel – and really be – limited by many things which seem beyond our power and our grasp: family history, psychological wounds, physical problems, external events, in faith we believe that we are not trapped in a world of despair and repetition. We are not under the spell of an implacable destiny. The call to repentance and conversion is a promise that new doors may be opened, new avenues explored, that renewed life is possible.

If Jesus were to stop to call us to repentance and conversion, that would mean that God has given up on us. But that is impossible because God has inscribed us on the palms of his hands (Cf. Is 49:16).

Since the sin of Adam and Eve, God has shown that his very identity is to love us and to care for us. In Jesus Christ, he has united himself to us in such way that he cannot give up on us. He has called us and will never cease to call us again and again to come back to him. Our God is faithful in his affection for us because he loves us with an everlasting love (Cf. Jr 31:3).