

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Romans 12:1-2 / Matthew 16:21-27)
31.08.2014

New mind

In our first reading St Paul exhorted us with the following words: “Let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind”.

It would have been good for St Peter to hear those words, they could have prevented him from saying, once again, the wrong thing at the wrong time.

For his part Jesus has no time for St Peter’s advice and rebukes him harshly: “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God’s way but man’s”. Peter’s behaviour and mind are clearly rooted in what St Paul calls the “old self” (Eph 4:22). The reality is that St Peter will have still a long and painful journey to accomplish in order to be clothed “with the new self, created according to the likeness of God” (Eph 4:24).

However, St Peter’s mistake is a great lesson for us. The first one is that, as Christians, we have to think and behave in a distinctive way. In regard to politics, economics, sexuality, in regard to all that has an impact on humanity, we are not supposed to think, reflect and decide in the way the world does. We are meant to bring the light of the Gospel to bear on all things.

Unfortunately, since the beginning, Christians have always been tempted to think and behave like the majority around them and especially like those who exercise power.

The challenge is that while our social background, education, family ties, nationality, and political affiliations are important, our minds and our decisions should be inspired, renewed, challenged and shaped by the Gospel and not determined just by these other influences.

Precisely because of the Gospel we cannot remain neutral and detached from the great questions of our time and yet we do the world no favour if we enter into the debate with “the spirit of the world” (1Co 2:12). We must avoid a spirit which is dualistic, self-centred and divisive, focused on winning at all costs, and driven by envy and power.

In our Gospel reading, we have to acknowledge that St Peter’s perspective is not completely absurd: he does not want the one he respects and loves to suffer. Who would disagree with that? And yet the apostle must look at the problem in a different way, in a renewed way. Following Pope Francis’ advice to the people of Korea, St Peter “must put Christ first and see all else in this world in relation to him and his eternal kingdom” (16.08.2014).

St Peter is called to see all things from Jesus’ perspective and not from his own. In a way, if he wants to follow Christ, he is compelled to conform his mind to the mind of Christ.

Throughout the Gospels, we see how the disciples are expecting a Messiah who is going to impose his authority with violence and rule like an earthly king. Coming back from a Samaritan village where they have not been welcomed, the disciples ask Jesus: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them” and Jesus rebukes them (Lk 9:54-55). At Gethsemane, when one of his disciples draws his sword, Jesus declares: “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26:52).

Repeatedly, Jesus needs to reaffirm that his “kingdom is not from this world” (Jn 18:36), that human considerations must give way to the Gospel, that national, political,

economical and societal values must pass through the sieve of the Gospel in order to be of some value for the building up of the Kingdom.

Moreover in his dialogue with Jesus, St Peter is challenging a very important aspect of Jesus' identity and God's nature: can the Messiah suffer? Can he be vulnerable and handed over into the hands of sinners? Can he die on a cross?

Here again Jesus invites the apostle to acquire a new mind, the mind of God who chose to become vulnerable, humble and poor out of love for us. This change of mind is necessary for us if we want our Churches to be conformed to the Gospel and to be seeds of conversion in our societies. What is at stake is nothing other than our fidelity to our vocation in this world.

If we consider the way we exercise authority in our communities, the way we relate to those who are on the margins of our societies, the way we deal with money, if we align ourselves on the world, if we think like the world, if we enter into a dynamic modelled by the world, then we cannot bear witness to Christ in a credible way. On these subjects, and on many others, we have to think and decide according to the mind of Jesus Christ.

We may think that in order to deal with the crisis in our Church we need to change the archbishop of Armagh, we have to develop programmes and strategies for evangelisation, or we must organise meetings and synods. All this will be fruitful and will contribute to the building up of the Kingdom only if we reach a deeper level of transformation. As St Paul writes: our "minds must be renewed by a spiritual revolution" (Ep 4:23 BJ).

If we want to reach out to our brothers and sisters in humanity, particularly to the younger generations, the minds of our religious leaders and ours must undergo a revolution, a radical conversion to the Gospel and to its way of relating to authority, sexuality and economics.

The revolution we are talking about here should not touch only our heads. Words and good intentions are not enough. "Our behaviour" must "change, modelled by a new mind".

In the simplicity of our human relationships, those with whom we live, in the small and great decisions we have to make, may the whole of our lives bear witness to the newness of the Gospel, to the life-giving and ever relevant message of Jesus Christ.