

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ezekiel 18:25-28 / Matthew 21:28-32)
28.09.2014

Sin

Have you ever noticed that, in English, the shortest words very often have the deepest meanings? It is as if 2 or 3 letters were enough in order to express the greatest realities in our world and in our lives: yes and no, sky and sea, old and new, God and sin.

Today we are going to reflect on this last very small word: sin. It is a word which provokes unease and fear and yet this word is used everywhere and about everything, in advertisements about coffee or cheese, occasionally in catechisms and often in novels.

Without presuming to be exhaustive, in our first reading, the prophet Ezekiel gives us a definition of what a sin is: it is to renounce one's integrity. Here the word *integrity* means: uprightness and honesty. However it is interesting to remember that the word *integrity* also and primarily means: the state of being whole, undivided.

As well as being a threat to our relationship with God, a sin is an offence to our own wholeness, a sin divides us and scatters us, it is an attack against what is truly human as well as what is truly divine in us. As much as being an offender, the sinner is first a victim of his or her own sin.

This explains why our sins are displeasing to God. As a loving Father, he is deeply saddened to see his sons and daughters being hurt and his creation being disfigured each time we fall into the traps of the evil one. Our heavenly Father's will, which is the theme of our Gospel reading, is that we may grow in his image and likeness, that we may journey in relationship with him, with others and with ourselves in freedom and respect.

With its allies, secrecy and guilt, sin always isolates us and makes us terribly lonely and hopeless. It leads us to a place where we can no longer feel at home, whether it is in our hearts or in the world. Just as it did in the Garden of Eden, sin creates estrangement from our selves, from others and from God.

Yet the good news is that God is still looking for us. And so the last word, which comes from God in Jesus Christ, is not about sin but about forgiveness and reconciliation.

Moreover, despite our habit of speaking about *original sin*, we could say that what is first in God's creation is not sin, but God's love and forgiveness which existed before the Fall.

As Pope Francis reminded us: "The Lord never tires of forgiving, it is we who tire of asking for forgiveness" (17.03.2013). This sentence highlights what is at stake in Jesus' meeting with the chief priests and the elders of the people. Prostitutes and tax collectors were aware of their need to change, they knew that there was something wrong in their lives and they repented while the leaders of the Jewish people considered themselves to be clean and perfect. Not only were they tired of asking for forgiveness but they did not even see the point of asking for forgiveness at all.

In fact we could say that their greatest mistake was that they did not have a sense of their sinfulness. I think that therein lies the cause of their total inability to welcome Jesus. If we think that we are in good health we do not need the doctor and the truth is that Jesus came for those who are sick (cf. Lk 5:30-32) not those who are in good health.

The problem is that for too long in our Churches we have associated sin with fear, judgment, punishment, anguish, shame and guilt. I would not dismiss all these feelings and attitudes as completely irrelevant, and yet I do not think that they should be at the forefront of

our reflection and our experience of sinfulness. In one of his prayers Thomas Merton expresses well how we should relate to sin: “My infidelity to Christ, instead of making me sick with despair drives me to throw myself all the more blindly into the arms of his mercy”.

In 1945, Cyril Connolly wrote: “Those of us who were brought up as Christians and who have lost our faith have retained the Christian sense of sin without the saving belief in redemption. This poisons our thoughts and so paralyses us in action”.

I wonder if sometimes Christians do not adopt the same kind of dynamic: while they may retain a strong sense of sin, they forget that God is love and, as St Paul writes, that: “Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1Tm 1:15). For sure the knowledge of sin without the knowledge of God’s love and forgiveness is absurd and leads to despair.

At the other end of the spectrum, to deny the reality of sin would go against everything we experience. Despite the help of psychology and sociology, we know that we are not completely irresponsible. When we act, speak or think in ways that are not in conformity with God’s will for our life and which threaten the sense of what it means to be a human being in the presence of God and in relationship with others, our hearts cry out for forgiveness and for hope.

Left to ourselves, we can do nothing with our sins. When we try to deal with them on our own, they have the upper hand. To throw ourselves into the arms of God’s mercy and to welcome his forgiveness is the only way for us to see our sins mysteriously transformed into opportunities of grace. Ultimately God’s greatest miracle is that he is able to use our sins in order to make us grow in humility, in faith, in trust and in love, and ultimately in humanity.

It is essential for all of us to hear the words from Dostoevsky: “Fear nothing and never be afraid (...). There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive to the truly repentant! Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God (...). Believe that God loves you as you cannot conceive; that he loves you with your sin, in your sin” (*Brothers...*, Bk II, Ch. 3, p. 33/526).