

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Isaiah 66:10-14 / Luke 10:1-12.17-20)
07.07.2019

Why should we rejoice that our names are written in heaven?

Is it just because our names are inscribed in a big book that St Peter will open when we arrive at the pearly gates? It is more than that.

Today, in the 21st c. we believe that we cannot be reduced to our name, that we are more than our name, with its cultural background or religious roots. We agree that it says something about our identity but it is clear to us that our name does not reveal the whole of who we are.

While many people think that they can make a name for themselves and aim to do so and while we are inclined to think that we own our lives, in the 1st century of our era a person's name was believed to be given by God and was considered to be a sign of the Lord's claim upon a person's life. For Jesus and the biblical tradition, the name was the person, an expression of the person's place in the universe, it defined his or her mission and destiny.

When Jesus invites us to rejoice that our names are written in heaven, this is because our lives belong to God. If our names are written in heaven then here and now – and not only at the end of our human journey – we are in God as he is within us.

We can rejoice because this is not something we obtain only through hard labour. It is a grace. We do not have to buy it with good deeds, it is God's gracious gift offered to us by Jesus Christ. St Paul marvelled at God's generosity: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who (...) chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (...), raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." (Eph 1:3-4; 2:6)

At a time when many feel disconnected, lonely and without roots, Jesus tells us that we belong to God and that we have a home in him.

When things are difficult, when we are lost, we have to remember that, in God, we have sure ground on which we can stand, a place where we can be at rest. To sum up, to have "our names written in heaven" means that we are with God.

So the question we now need to pose is this: where is God?

The problem with the expression "in heaven" is that it could be interpreted as an invitation to spend our time staring into the sky in order to discern God's presence there.

While the image of God in heaven rightly speaks of his transcendence, his complete otherness, we have to remember that this image is not fully adequate because, by his revelation in Jesus Christ, God has become "closer to us than we are to ourselves" (St Augustine, *Conf.* III, 6, 11). As we sing in one of our hymns: "He whom nothing can contain / No one can compel / Bound his timeless Godhead here / In our time to dwell" (Stanbrook).

So to be with God is to be here and now in our own hearts, the temple within ourselves where God has chosen to dwell (Cf. 1Co 3:16). When we dwell with ourselves, then we are with God.

In our gospel reading, Jesus proclaims that "the kingdom of God is very near", in fact it is so near to us that, later in the same Gospel, he goes as far as to say that "the kingdom of God is within" us (Lk 17:21).

If God dwells in me, then the challenge for me is to really believe that he dwells also in each one of you, in your hearts. It is when we situate ourselves at that deeper level of our identity that we can relate to one another in a more life-giving way.

The misunderstandings and trials which persistently mar our relationships and the lives of our families or Christian communities have many different causes, however without sounding too simplistic we could acknowledge that they arise and endure because we are not really living in God, and this is because we are not living at the level of our hearts. Too often we allow ourselves to be uprooted from our sure ground in God and so we are tossed to and fro by the winds of insecurity, pride and envy.

In our Gospel reading Jesus commissions us to be heralds of peace. We know that this peace that we have to bring to others is not a reality of this world. It is Christ himself who is our peace (Cf. Eph 2:14). We can bring him to others only if we are in God, if we allow our name, our very self to be rooted, grounded in God.

When we remain in God, then we can look at others and at the world from God's perspective, we can deal with disagreements and tensions with God's tools of patience, generosity, mercy and respect. Then we can be bearers of peace, peacemakers and bridge builders.

We see now that the small expression "your names are written in heaven" is indeed a powerful statement. It speaks about our belonging to God, our being rooted and grounded in him, and from there able to bear fruit and to transform the world.

In fact there are two causes of rejoicing in Jesus' words: the first is that we are in God here and now. Things may be complicated, life may be a struggle and relationships may be difficult yet, over and over again, we can throw ourselves confidently into the loving arms of God, sure that he is present to us, always with us and for us.

The second cause of rejoicing is that because we are in God, we are not puppets on a string, thrown into the world without any real connection and therefore unable to impact upon it.

For most of us, it will be in the discreet and humble daily tasks of our lives that we will be able to submit the devils of greed and rivalry, to tread underfoot the serpents and scorpions of selfishness and bitterness. Yet it will be our way, or maybe it would be better to say God's way in us, to cure the wounds of our brothers and sisters and to build the kingdom of peace.

Ultimately, it is here and now, where we are, that we are called to rejoice in God our Saviour, for he has looked with favour on our lowliness and has done great things for us. Holy is his name. (Cf. Lk 1:47-49)