

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ezekiel 33:7-9 / Matthew 18:15-20)
06.09.2020
We are responsible for one another

At the beginning of human history as it is related in the book of Genesis, we find Cain asking a very pertinent question. After he has killed his brother Abel, God asks him: “Where is your brother Abel?” and Cain answers: “Am I supposed to look after my brother?” (4:9)

Many centuries later, in our own days, when a child, a woman or a man is despised or abused, when people are not respected because of their race, the colour of their skin, their gender or sexual orientation, when they are not given the education and the healthcare they need in order to grow to their full stature, it is as if we are brought back to the book of Genesis and its question: “Am I supposed to look after my brother or my sister?”

Today in our first reading, God answers that question: “I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel. (...) I will hold you responsible for their deaths” (Ez 33:7-8).

Yes we are responsible for one another. We are accountable for the life and the death of any man or woman.

This responsibility is not optional, we cannot dismiss it as something irrelevant or consider that it can be relegated to the bottom of the list of our priorities. It should stand right at the core of our faith because it is the litmus test of the authenticity and the quality of our relationship with God. The words of the king in Matthew’s Gospel remind us of our responsibility: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (...) Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (25:40.45)

Among the many challenges caused by the Covid-19, there is one which deals precisely with this question: are we willing to act responsibly, to be responsible for one another? Covid-19 is a challenge to our self-centredness and individualism.

A few days ago Pope Francis dedicated a whole General audience to the subject, he declared: “Solidarity today is the road to living in a post-pandemic world, toward the healing of our interpersonal and social sicknesses. There is no other option: either we move forward along the road of solidarity, or things will get worse.” (02.09.2020)

For example, when we do not comply with all the measures which are put in place in order to prevent the spread of the virus, when we refuse to wear a mask – when it is required – or to respect the regulations about social distancing, then we expose our individualism and, unlike Cain, we do not ask a question but state bluntly: “I do not care about my brother or my sister.”

Here the famous words of the poet are really appropriate: “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; (...) any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.” (John Donne)

In this context, as in many others, to respect myself and to care for myself depends on whether or not I respect others and care for them.

There are many ways by which we can express concretely what it means to be responsible for one another. Today both the prophet Ezekiel and our Lord Jesus give us one way which is particularly relevant for us in our time of crisis: dialogue. Both invite us to go and talk with one another, to listen to one another, to value and respect words as means for fostering communion.

We are responsible for our words, for the way we speak to one another, for the way we listen to one another. We all know that words can either kill or redeem, that they have the

power to imprison people in a destructive image of themselves or that they are able to open new doors and renew people in hope. In our two readings today, to refuse to speak with and to listen to another is a matter of life and death.

For Ezekiel and Jesus, words, dialogue, encounter are means used for healing divisions, for building up the community, for restoring us to our dignity as children of God made in the image of the Trinity.

According to our biblical readings, we go and talk to those who have done something wrong not in order to humiliate them, not to reinforce their situation of exclusion but in order to win them back because the wound of division hurts us as much as it hurts them. We are responsible for one another.

At the moment many of our political leaders seem to be failing in their responsibility to speak words which foster communion and build up respectful relationships. Even some of our Christian leaders seem keen to stir up divisions and to align themselves with extremist positions. Sometimes on social media we read words which display a cruel lack of basic human sensitivity; words which show no Christian respect for somebody created in the image and likeness of God; words which are deprived of a mature sense of responsibility for the future of the human family.

Pope Francis reminded us that “we carry forever in our hearts the longing for living in communion, for belonging to a community” and that “the community requires mutual listening and dialogue, based on the responsible use of language” (*Message for the 53rd World Communications Day*, 24.01.2019).

The community we long for is a reflection of the Trinity. We cannot build this community on our own. We need one another, we are co-workers responsible for each other. Like the good shepherd we must search for the sheep that belong to God, we must seek them out and rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered. We have the duty to seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak (cf. Ez 12:11-12.16).

Let us not fool ourselves into believing that our words and deeds do not matter. They shape our lives, have an impact upon the lives of others and upon the life of the world in which we live. We are responsible for one another.

May the strange times we are going through be an opportunity for us to be more attentive to the needs of those around us, and more responsible for what we say and do so that, together, we may build up in love the body we are called to form (cf. Eph 4:16).