

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ezekiel 18:25-28 / Matthew 21:28-32)
27.09.2020
To live is to change

According to Dante, the trait which characterises hell is hopelessness. At the entrance of hell are written the following words: “All hope abandon, you who enter here” (*Inferno* III:10).

If “to live is to change” (St John Henry Newman, *An Essay... in Guides...* n. 46, p. 32), then we can say that hell is truly the place where there is no hope of change, no room for conversion or growth. In hell, we are stuck in the mud of our sins and limitations, we are held prisoners of our mistakes, of the wrong we have done. There in hell, wounds remain open for ever and misunderstandings remain unresolved.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is all about life, in the complexity of our hearts and their journey to God. This journey is rarely straightforward. God is aware of the tensions and contradictions which mark our decisions and actions.

Yet God does not want us to be defined by one event, one decision, one choice. “God looks at the heart” (1Sam 16:7), at its longing and striving. What matters for God is what the heart aims at, the values which guide it. In this context, with God, there is always the possibility for us to repent, to convert, to change. As pilgrims we may fall, go astray, get lost, take the wrong turn, wander, drag our feet and grumble, yet with God’s grace, if we look at our inner compass, the Spirit who dwells within us (cf. Rm 5:5), we can get back on track and with that the energy and the hope we need in order to move on will well up within us.

Our two readings remind us today that we can change either for the better or for the worse, we are free to say yes or to say no to God’s call to conversion and growth. Like the tax collector Matthew (cf. Mt 9:9-13), we can get up and answer the invitation and change our way of living or like the unnamed young rich man (cf. Mt 16:16-30), we can go away sad and grieving.

The ongoing call to conversion, the invitation to go deeper and to grow is not addressed only to others or to the world, it is addressed to you and me. It is our hearts which need to be reformed over and over again. If we want to change the world, if we want to change something in the lives of our communities and families, we have first to allow the Spirit to change our hearts and minds, to refocus them on what really matters.

Without being exhaustive, we can say that, most of the time, our refusal to change expresses itself in two ways: either we put a lot of energy into trying to change those around us, while we stay stuck in the mud of our certitudes we impose changes on others that we do not consider for ourselves; or we do not challenge anybody or anything and so nobody challenges us, our main concern is to maintain the status quo. These two attitudes could be summed up in two rules: firstly “Please change so that I do not have to change”, secondly “I do not ask you to change so that you do not ask me to change”. In both cases the result is the same: life in the person or in the community is stifled, we create the best setting for a cosy and mediocre form of survival.

This was exactly the problem of the chief priests and the elders of the people whom we hear Jesus challenge today in our Gospel reading: they do not want to change and so are unable to enter the Kingdom of God. On the contrary, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are ready to take the risk of a radical change in their lives.

As we journey in life, it is important to remember that holiness is not a state in which we can settle permanently, none of us can reach the goal (cf. Phil 3:12), it is a journey, an ongoing task, it is the progressive work of the Spirit within us. Martin Luther states this very clearly when he writes: “This life is not being; it is becoming. As yet we are not; we are becoming. It is not yet done and has not yet taken place; it is in the process of becoming. It is not the end; it is the way” (*Defence and Explanation of All the Articles*, AE 32:24). To refuse to change, to resist being converted is to condemn ourselves; it is to hinder ourselves from becoming the one we are supposed to be.

Here it may be important to be reminded that the driving force for change cannot be the fear of God, understood as the fear of a high court judge, one who is ready to punish mercilessly. The real driving force for change, for conversion from a Christian perspective is love. The only force capable of transforming us is real, truthful, caring and challenging love. If we want to regain the image and likeness of God who is love (cf. 1Jn 4:16) we have to be moved by love.

Fear may help us to change our external behaviours, but only love will change our hearts. The notion of repentance which is linked to the notion of conversion is about a transformative change of heart, a transformation of the whole of our lives.

It is in this loving context that we can fruitfully fulfil our duty to help one another to change and renounce what is not life-giving in our words, habits and decisions. Rooted and grounded in love (cf. Eph 3:17), not in judgemental pride and anger, we have to spur one another to good deeds (cf. Heb 10:24) and to teach and instruct each other (cf. Col 3:16) in the way of the Gospel

To the disciples who ask: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, Jesus answers: “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:1-3). This explains why conversion, repentance and change are so difficult for us: it is a kind of rebirth. For us it is always a journey from what we think we know to what is unknown, and that is somewhat frightening. Yet the emergence of Christ’s life within us cannot be without the birth pangs of letting go, repentance and conversion.

This new birth cannot happen without the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis reminded us a few months ago: “We can only allow the Holy Spirit to transform us. (...) It is He who changes us, who works this transformation in us, this rebirth from on high.” (*Hom.* 21.04.2020)

Let us not be afraid, our rebirth is a promise of life. With the help of the Spirit, let us discern the small changes we have to embrace today so that the world may be a bit different. May we all know the joy of an ongoing conversion which brings us closer to God, closer to one another and closer to ourselves.