

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Wisdom 7:7-11 / Mark 10:17-30)

10.10.2021

*The Gaze of Love*

While the episode of the meeting between Jesus and the rich young man is found in the three synoptic Gospels, Mark is the only evangelist to mention that “Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him”.

The contrast between Jesus’ love and the young man’s sadness makes St Mark’s account poignant and challenging.

The story hinges on Jesus’ loving gaze on the young man. In fact, in the Bible, over and over again, we are told that the way we look at things and others matters. From the first book of the Bible in which Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes” (Gn 3:6) to the last book of the New Testament in which the disciples in Laodicea are advised to buy ointment to anoint their eyes so that they may see (Rev 3:18), we are reminded that how we look at other people and at the world really matters.

The question we should ask ourselves today is the one Jesus asked his disciples: “Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see?” (Mk 8:17-18)

What kind of lenses do we use when we look at people around us? Do we allow our fears, our religious or political prejudices to distort the reality? Do we use the lenses of our narrowmindedness or, like Jesus, do we look at others through the lenses of love? Do we look at our natural resources, at creation as something that we can use and abuse or as a gift that we have to respect and cherish because it is a sacrament of God’ s love for us?

The great difference between us and Jesus is that Jesus is other-centred while we are self-centred. We take ourselves to be the measuring line in regard to those we meet, we judge them according to our standards, we try to make them fit into our categories. Jesus, for his part, meets us where we are at and welcomes us as we are. He does not close us into fixed categories.

For Jesus, to look at somebody with love means to open a new door, it is an invitation to tread a new path.

There is another aspect which is important in the way Jesus looks at the young man: Jesus does not impose himself. There is something radically unconditional in Jesus’ attitude. Jesus’ love for us is not conditioned by our response to his call or even to his questions, it is given freely and generously.

It reminds me of the way Thomas Merton describes the love he experienced when he was 11 in a French family: “Their love did not burn you, it did not hold you, it did not try to imprison you in demonstrations, or trap your feet in the snares of its interests.” (*Elected...*, p. 47).

The real drama of the situation is that Jesus’ love leaves us free... even free to say no and to walk away sad. In our Gospel reading, we should not think that the young man’s encounter with Jesus was the end of the journey for him. Jesus’ love is patient and perseverant, it does not give up on us. As Miroslav Volf writes: “Only grace can open the door that has been shut in its face. So God continues to give to the ungrateful and to forgive the unrepentant. Christ stands before the closed door of grace-resistant heart and knocks gently with a nail-pierced hand.” (*Free...*, p. 205)

I am sure that Jesus created other opportunities to meet the young man, to show him his love, hoping against all hope (cf. Rm 4:18) that the young man would open the door and let him in.

Today and every day, the Lord looks at you and me with love, inviting us to become who we truly are, to discover more and more what it means to be alive, to grow in our love and understanding of who we are and who God is, to be more generous in the self-giving of our lives. All these invitations can be challenging and unsettling but we have nothing to fear, Jesus never asks us to do something which he is not ready to do with us, he never invites us to tread a new path without walking it by our side.

The Catholic Church in Ireland is invited by the Lord to walk a synodal path. This process provides us with an opportunity to listen together and more intently to what the Spirit is saying to the Church, and to listen to one another as members of the Body of Christ. We have to be careful not to be like the rich young man and shy away from the challenge.

According to Pope Francis, for Jesus, “the biggest problem was not those who followed him, but those who remained motionless, idle, on the sidelines. (...) The scribes never took a risk.” (*Daily Meditation*, 13.01.2017)

To engage in a Christian life, to be a Catholic, is to take a risk. It is to embark upon a risky journey. Today in our Gospel reading Jesus mentions persecutions as part of the deal. Here we do not risk persecutions but we do have to go through the present difficult times. Moreover the Lord himself always asks us to walk the extra mile, to launch out into the deep. In all this we can rely on Jesus’ loving gaze, it is our security and our strength, it is the guiding star that helps us to move on and continue the journey.

If we keep our eyes fixed on the Lord, we see in his eyes the depth of God’s forgiveness and generosity. Under his gaze, we become able to look at ourselves and at one another with love. St Anthony of Padua writes: “If you look upon Christ, you will be able to see the greatness of your dignity and worth (...). Nowhere else can we better recognize our own value, than by looking into the mirror of the cross.” (*Sermones dominicales et festivi*, III, pp. 213-214)

The rich young man failed to see his own value in Jesus’ eyes and he walked away sad. We are made for joy, so let us not be afraid to take the risk to look at those we meet, and at the whole of creation, with love, with respect and care. This will be a good way for us to see the greatness of our own dignity. If we open our eyes we will see that “everything is possible to God.”