

Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday)
(Isaiah 50:4-7 / Luke 22:14-23:56)
10.04.2022

Only in Luke's Passion Narrative do we find the following lines: *Simon, Simon, you must know that Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and, once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers.*

Reading those words this morning, I recall how they spoke to me very forcibly some years ago. They had been fed back to me by a priest in the context of a spiritual conversation at a moment in my life when I was acutely aware of the poverty of my response to what was being asked of me in the service of the Church. I remember how just before that dialogue I had read in *lectio divina* the episode of Peter's call to be *a fisher of people* found in in chapter 5 of Luke's Gospel. I explained to the priest with whom I spoke how I found myself identifying strongly with the apostle's declaration in the scene of the miraculous catch (Luke 5) in which Peter declared: *Be gone from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.* The priest I was speaking with responded to what I shared by inviting me to think of Jesus' prayer for Peter at the point in the story where we meet him today. He also asked me to bear in mind that the story of the Peter-Jesus relationship goes further still (it might be better to say, deeper still), reaching its climax, in that wonderful post-resurrection encounter on the Lakeside recorded in chapter 21 of John's Gospel. In that latter scene Peter is given to see that his sins (his failures and denials) are forgiven. His particular leadership role is confirmed; it is confided to him anew – this time what is asked of him being framed in other terms. Peter is told in his post-resurrection encounter with Jesus – who previously had called him to be *a fisher of people* – that now he will be a shepherd. An extraordinary pastoral charge will be his. Peter is to serve as the Lord's loving servant tending to and caring for Christ's own flock. Peter is to feed Christ's lambs; he is to look after His sheep; he is to nourish with the food he is given to feed them.

Let us return to the Passion narrative read this morning. The story begins in the Upper Room with Jesus predicting the horrible chain of events that will ensue. He speaks of His betrayal by one of those He has chosen to be with Him. He foretells how all of those He has gathered around Him as close collaborators will forsake Him. He declares that Peter will deny Him. Jesus addresses Peter, who has proclaimed his unflinching loyalty and steadfast love for Him, saying: *Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times.* It is at this point that Jesus assures Peter of His prayer for him.

If Jesus is portrayed in John's Gospel (in His High Priestly Prayer), at the moment He entered into His Sacred Passion, as having prayed for all His disciples (including those of time to come – ourselves along their number), in Luke's Gospel he is portrayed as having prayed for Peter very specifically and above all. In the text when Jesus declares to Peter in verse 31: *Satan will have you* the 'you' at this point is plural; it refers to all the apostles. But, when Jesus goes on to say in verse 32: *I have prayed for you* this 'you' refers to Simon Peter alone. So, while Jesus warns Peter that the devil has the entire company of the Twelve in his sights, He highlights that Simon Peter will be especially targeted by Satan. It is for this reason that Jesus has prayed for him. Put simply, Jesus says to Peter: *Satan wants you, Simon Peter, but I want you too. My prayers have been, are and will be with you. At the end of the day you will not be 'had' by Satan, for you are mine.*

Jesus clearly knew Peter through and through. He was well aware of Simon's weaknesses. He knew that Peter was not quite as brave and courageous as he (and others, no doubt) imagined him to be. Jesus knew what Peter had said at the outset of the story, but perhaps had forgotten

along the way, that he was *a weak man, a sinful man*. Jesus was conscious that Simon Peter was capable of failing and that fail he would. If Jesus made this clear to Peter, warning him that he would fall in a way that would leave him bitterly disappointed with himself, nonetheless (indeed, all the more) the Master wanted Simon-Peter to know that He (the Lord) still had confidence in him. Jesus assured Simon that He would still stretch out his hand to save him. He wanted Peter to realise that whatever his struggles, his weaknesses, his failings and falls, he would be lifted up and restored to the ministry confided to him. Jesus wanted Peter to rest assured that He (the Lord) would be there for him in the future, just as He had been there for him in time past – for example, at that time when Peter had taken fright and began to sink as he walked on the waters at the Master's bidding.

Put simply, Jesus wanted Peter to know that he was to remain chosen and called whatever his weaknesses. Later on it will be made manifest that whatever the apostle's deficiencies (and these certainly were neither ignored nor denied by Jesus), Peter would still be confided an all important spiritual mission. Simon Peter would be asked to *strengthen and support his brothers and sisters in the faith* in a quite unique way. He would be commissioned to tend to and care for the flock, to feed the lambs and the sheep of Christ's own sheepfold.

The point to be grasped is that Peter's mission would not depend upon his impeccability, but upon God's mercy. The same is true for all of us two millennia later.

If we are at all self-aware, then we will realise that each one of us has his or her struggles, weaknesses, failings, deficiencies – and, let us not be afraid to admit them, our sins. These can and will discourage us at times. These can weaken our trust in ourselves; they can detract from our confidence. Sometimes they can lead us to nearly lose heart altogether. The call addressed to us is not to allow ourselves to be crushed and destroyed by them. It is a call to get up when we fall – and fall we will... inevitably.

Let's face the facts. Just like Peter, you and I will have made some bad choices along life's way – maybe even some terrible decisions. We will have been lacking in courage and consistency at times. We will have been downright cowardly at certain moments. We will have failed and fallen. And yet... And yet the Lord's call upon our lives will have remained intact.

If we are at all lucid, we will be aware that we are capable of things we would prefer not to be capable of – in the negative sense! We will have discovered just how fickle we can be at times... and this despite our desire to remain firm in faith, strongly rooted in the Lord.

The realisation of our inconsistencies will often be used by Satan to discourage us and pull us down. In a worst case scenario it can hold us pinned to the ground when we have fallen from grace. It is precisely at such moments that we need listen to Jesus and to hear what He said to Simon Peter this morning as a word spoken to us. *I have prayed for you.*

This morning I suggest that we tend the ear of our hearts to listen to Jesus go on to say to us: *I will bring you back. I will use you... if only you allow Me to do so. However weak you have been – however weak you still are and will always remain – you can be used by Me to strengthen your brothers and sisters. What matters is not your strength, but Mine... which, makes itself felt best in human weakness. You can learn even from your falls from grace. I can use even these to equip you to exercise a more meaningful ministry in regard to others.*

I am firmly convinced that Jesus wants all of us to hear that we have a mission to fulfil – and this no matter what has happened in our lives. We are all called to be instruments in the Lord's hands. Even our weaknesses and failures can be used to help us grow in the true spirit of humble

service the Lord awaits of us as ministers of His generous mercy and witnesses to His faithful loving kindness.

Let us draw special comfort from that little phrase at the very heart of the few verses I took as my text today: *I have prayed for your recovery.*

The Lord wills and prays for us. He wills and prays for our recovery... so that He may use us all the more to help others recover their lives too!

Amen!