

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Exodus 32:7-11.13-14 / Luke 15:1-32)
11.09.2022
Theology of frailty

Today our 1st reading is a very interesting piece of biblical literature. The dialogue between Moses and God is quite surprising: it begins with God being angry because the people of Israel have committed the sin of idolatry. God wants to destroy them while promising to create a new great nation through Moses. Here starts the unexpected part of the dialogue: Moses does not agree with God. He reminds the Lord that these people, sinners though they are, are the object of an earlier promise which has to be respected. It is as if Moses needed to remind God of his plan! The astonishing thing is that God changes his mind and decides to cling to the 1st promise.

The good news in this story is that the people of God, those to whom God is faithful and to whom he promises life and peace, the people of Israel and all of us today, is made up of men and women who are stubborn and inattentive, people who regularly take a wrong turn and often fall and fail.

It is our great mistake to think that we have to be spic and span men and women in order to be God's people. We tend to see ourselves as the good ones, we consider ourselves to be the guardians of purity of faith and morals, called to welcome those who are bad, the sinners who knock at the doors of our communities.

No, we are men and women who are all in need of God's mercy. And it is precisely because we have experienced God's mercy that we welcome in our midst those who long for the same gracious gift from God.

What Moses teaches us is that sins and mistakes, wounds and weaknesses are part of God's plan. To forget this is certainly the big mistake of the elder son in St Luke's parable. The elder son looks at his younger brother from a high moral ground, he considers himself to be somebody inside looking at somebody on the outside. Yet the conclusion of the parable reveals that the one welcomed inside is the sinner while the elder son is outside refusing to go in.

None of us has reached the goal (cf. Phil 3:12) and, over and over again, we need to be found by a God who humbled himself in Jesus Christ to meet us where we are and to look for us when we hide.

If the Lord came to look for those who are sick (cf. Mk 2:17), then indeed the Church is a field hospital (cf. Francis *Letter*, 03.03.2015) in which we all stand in need of healing.

Our communities are not places where sin and weaknesses are not present, they are places where, by the help of God's grace, we learn to live with sin and weaknesses, places where we deal with these ills in a proper way, and where ultimately death is always defeated by life. Our communities are schools where we grow in humility and in love, where we learn what it means to be born again at every step of the journey.

We have no interest to picture ourselves, in the Donatist fashion (4th-6th c.), as a group of the "perfect" or predestined saints. In this world the Church is a mixed community and will stay like that to the very end, like the ark with both clean and unclean animals together, like a ship full of unruly passengers who always seem to be on the point of wrecking it.

This explains why, all of us, each and every day, in the Lord's Prayer have to say: "Forgive us our trespasses" (Mt 6:12).

The dream of a perfect Church is a dream which creates hypocritical Christians and heartless communities.

A Document on Spirituality for the Synod reminds us that “in a counter-cultural acceptance of personal and institutional vulnerability, the Church can truly become a place of refuge for all who live with the realities of a vulnerable and precarious life.” (*Towards a Spirituality of Synodality*, p. 12)

The elder son thought that belonging was a right that he had gained by his good deeds and his obedience to the rules. He had to discover that he was wrong.

Belonging is God’s gift to those who acknowledge that, on their own they can do nothing and that, like the prodigal son, they need God’s help and the support of others to help them on the journey towards recovery.

The message conveyed by Moses and by Luke is that our spirituality and our theology must include vulnerability and inter-dependence. There is no reflection on the Church which does not consider it as made for people who are, as Luther puts it, *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinners).

This is really good news and a great source of joy for all of us. The theme of joy is an important thread in St Luke’s parables. This is the joy we long for, the joy to know and experience when we realise that we are looked for when we are lost, cared for when we are wounded, welcomed when we feel rejected and lonely.

Such a community has patiently learnt to rely on God alone. It does not care about keeping up appearances. It is more concerned with building bridges than walls.

This is the Church that we must build up if we want to be faithful to God’s desire for the world. The process of conversion must begin here and now, with the people with whom we live and journey: it is about being humble and honest about our vulnerability and filled with mercy and joy because we are loved no matter what.