

Commentary to the 24th Sunday Ordinary Time

A Lost Person is a Defeat for God



“Love is strong as death, passion is fierce as hell. Deep waters cannot quench love nor rivers sweep it away” Song 8:6-8. With these famous images the Book of Song of Songs describes the irresistible force of love. It always runs the risk (we know it!) to become an affective connection: love presupposes freedom and runs the risk of being refused and be unsuccessful. Even part of it is jealousy, worries, anxiety, fear of abandonment, and all the emotions that fall under the category of “love-sickness.” “I am sick of love” repeats the spouse of the book of Songs (Son 2:5; 5:8).

God wanted this risk: He accepted to become weak and even took into account the possibility of failure. We have always imagined God as ‘omnipotent’, but in love this prerogative is excluded from the rules of the game. This word is not attributed to God in the Bible simply because since He created the universe with all its laws and gave life to human beings as free persons, He limited his power. This is what the Rabbis called contraction, self-limitation of God.

God cannot fail. He has to conquer people he loves. If He would use fear or increase risk of punishment, He would loose the game; He would not create love but hypocrisy. In Jesus, God made more often the experience of failure: Jerusalem did not know his love—“How many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling” (Lk

13:34); he could not make any miracles in Nazareth (Mk 6:5-6); the rich young man went away (Mt 19:16-22). The book of Revelation calls Jesus “pantokrator” (the one who holds everything in his hands) not omnipotent. People are free to play games regarding love; it is ‘man’ who leads the game with amazing ability. It is difficult to imagine that ‘man’ will lose control. Now we can understand Jesus’ words: “There is more joy in heaven for a sinner that repents, than for ninety-nine who do not need repentance” (Lk 15:7).

The lover greatest joy is to recapture the loved one and listen to her say: “I will go back to my husband, for I was better off then than now” (Hos 2:8).

First Reading

In 3000 BC in Egypt the bull was the image of the god Ptah in Memphis: the creator god giving growth to fields and animals. To him was attributed the fertility of the Nile’s lands. Symbol of strength had also a magical meaning: it was embalmed and mummified to immortalize virtue and in his honor many celebrations took place in temples.

The Israelites saw this and admired its strength and became seduced by it. They should have been able to avoid all these pagan practices after experiencing all the wonderful deeds that the Lord did for them in exodus, but as soon as Moses went out to the mountain, they fabricated a bull.

First part of the reading (vv. 7-10). The Lord had a strong reaction because of the infidelity of the people: “Let my anger blaze against them... but of you I will make a great nation.” Quite a temptation for Moses: to become the father of a just people. But Moses remains faithful to his people. He prefers to die with his people than to be saved alone.

Second part of the reading (vv. 7-10). The prayer of Moses. Usual translation: “Moses implored the Lord...” but the original text translates: “Moses began to caress the face of the Lord...” like a child who sees his father upset and tries to calm him and even to bring him to smile. This expression is one of the most beautiful in the Bible.

With this image we learn with what faith and trust we should approach God in prayer. What are Moses’ arguments? He did not say: they are sinners... the sin is not very big... they will never do it again (a sinner will continue to sin... we know that!). What Moses said: he reminded the Lord about the unconditional promise made to the patriarchs.... So he is saying: do not let the Egyptians say that you do not fulfill your word. This is the reason: the infinite love of God. A love bigger than the greatest infidelities.

Conclusion (v. 14)

“The Lord changed his mind...” What did the people do to merit this? Nothing. The Lord made everything: He remembered his promise and forgave his people. If we were to trust in our own strength, in our capacity to do good works, we would have all the reasons to despair. It is much safer to rely on the gratuitous love of God.

Second reading 1 Tim 1:12-17

Do we have any proofs that God does not condemn anyone? We do. Here is Paul’s argument: I was evil, a persecutor of Christians; I was the worse of them all, but the Lord showed me mercy! Why? Because Jesus came to save the sinner, and I am the biggest one! (vv. 12-15).

Paul said that God used him as an example to show how great is his magnanimity (v. 16). If one like him, enemy of the faith, the first among sinners, obtained mercy, can anyone think that God will treat him/her severely?

Objection: Paul was being delirious (true!), but he was not so guilty because he did not know that he was doing something wrong (1 Tim 1:13). The people of Israel turned to idolatry because of ignorance; the lost sheep (gospel today) went stray because of a mistake... and because of this the Lord understood. But does anyone sin in a different way? When someone sins, does he know exactly what he is doing? (Lk 23:34). (Pope Francis says that only the sin of corruption has no forgiveness).

Gospel

Parables of mercy (Prodigal Son was explained in Sunday of Lent). Today the first two parables: the lost sheep and the lost coin. Apparently these parables are easy to interpret—as if Jesus is telling his disciples to go after sinners (thieves, corrupt, adulterous) to get them back to the flock. But the message is not that and it is important to see to whom these parables are addressed.

The first verse says it clearly: “Tax collectors and sinners were seeking the company of Jesus... but Pharisees and scribes frowned at it” (vv. 1-3). Therefore the parables are not addressed to the disciples or to sinners but to the Pharisees and scribes—the just ones. Strange but true: those called to conversion are not the sinners but the just ones.

Trying to understand the position of the Pharisees and scribes: the Rabbis recommended, “One should not get close to unbelievers, except to convince them to follow the law of God.” It was even forbidden to accept an invitation to dine with a publican and with sinners. Jesus did something worse: not only accepting their invitation but receiving them in his house (“received sinners”).

Scribes and Pharisees would have no big objection if after Jesus invited sinners these would do some penance and prayer and promise to change their lives. What they could not understand is that being a

friend of sinners, these remained sinners (vv. 1-2). So they accused Jesus of organizing a feast for them. Therefore they needed an explanation from Jesus.

All banquet images are, in a certain way, an anticipation of the great banquet of the Reign of God. In this banquet there will not be a place for the evil and impious, but only for the just ones. Does Jesus not know this? Is he ignoring it on purpose or, worse still, challenges the rabbinic tradition?

The three parables are the self-defense and answer of Jesus. These parables are not told to convince the sinners, but to help the just to understand this idea. The three parables speak of joy (although not all in the parables are happy) and a feast is prepared (not all want to participate). Who are in and who are out?

Sinners are the lost sheep and the lost coin, and still (and this is the strangest part) all were around Jesus (we underline all to compare it with the previous verse). They live in his house; they feast, participating in the banquet of the kingdom. But the just are out and they will stay out unless they change their way of thinking realizing what is going on, understanding the novelty that God is revealing. It is under these three lights that these parables are told.

The lost sheep (vv. 4-7)

From the beginning Israel was a people of shepherds. It is not surprising that the Bible speak time and again about lambs, sheep, goats (more than 500 times) and using pastoral language to describe the care and tenderness, the attention of God for his people. Psalm 23 is a good example: “The Lord is my shepherd...”. Or the beautiful scenes of the return of the exiles from Babylonia: “Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in their bosom leading the ewes with care” Is 40:11.

And even Jesus uses these images—seeing the great crowds following him (according to Mark): “Jesus pitied them because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6:34).

In today’s gospel Jesus retakes the same image and tells a parable that is unusually illogical. The behavior of the shepherd is not realistic. He leaves in the desert the ninety-nine and goes house-to-house, calling friends and acquaintances, and organizing a feast for a rather banal incident.

These strange things tell us about the meaning of the parable. The Rabbis told, “the Lord rejoices with the resurrection of the just ones and is pleased with the destruction of the impious.” But Jesus turns around that official catechesis and tells what are the true feelings of God. Jesus says that God rejoices not with the destruction but with the redemption of the impious: “There will be more joy in heaven for the repentance of a sinner, than for ninety-nine who do not need conversion.” The “Father does not want that not even the smallest one be lost” (Mt 8:14), and organizes a feast for people who do not deserve it.

The doctrine of the just retribution was an important point in the theology of the Rabbis. Jesus contradicts it apparently showing that the tenderness and the care of God are not for those who deserve

it, but for those who need it.

For the Pharisees it is surprising that there is no requirement, no reproach, or some kind of punishment (some shepherds would brake the leg of a sheep that had the tendency to go stray of the flock), and that a gesture of good will would not be required... or of regret from the sinner. The work is completely from God who only desires the good of those who went astray. This is not an invitation to become a sinner in order to be loved by God, rather of recognizing us as sinner in the presence of God.

The just ones should place their life in order (because we are all sinners, and it is always difficult to say who is more or less sinner). They should especially correct their theological ideas about God. The criticism of Jesus, the norms of separation that they have, are the result of a false image of God that they have in their mind. A dangerous image because it does not allow them to participate in the feast, the ninety-nine sheep remain in the desert, and only the one lost arrive home because she allowed to be carried by the shepherd.

Dangerous, above all, because it is at the origin of fanaticism, intolerance, rigor and the separation of God. To help sinners find themselves it is necessary to tell them (as Jesus does) the truth about God.

Make them understand that God is not a judge to whom they should fear, but a friend that always loves them and who experiences the greatest joy when he can embrace them, seeing them free and happy to those who fell in the abyss of death.

The lost coin (vv. 8-10)

The rabbis used to repeat twice the most important teachings so that it would enter the mind of their listeners. It is for this reason that Jesus tells the second parable with a teaching almost similar to the first. We find the same inconsistencies: the explosion of uncontrollable joy of the woman that prepares a feast for friends and neighbors.

There is a new element in the parable, the very vivid worry of the woman in her effort, patience, perseverance, diligence to look for the lost coin: she turns on the light, sweeps the floor, looks carefully. It is the image of God who does not resign to loose any of his creatures (the number 10 is the symbol of the entire community) and who does not seat at the eternal banquet until the last of his children have entered his house.

The three parables underline complementary aspects of conversion. The first two parables emphasize that the initiative of conversion does not start from the person but from God, who always goes on searching the ones who are lost. The parable of the "prodigal son" (Lk 15:11-32) emphasizes the respect of God for human freedom. The Father does not force his children to remain in the house and does not force him to return. He simply waits.

Fernando Armellini and Alberto Rossa