

Commentary to the 2nd Sunday of Lent (A)

Introduction



“The Lord has chosen you—Moses says to Israel—from among all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his very own people” (Dt 14:2). “It was on your fathers that the Lord set his heart. He loved them and after them, he chose their descendants—you—preferring you to all the peoples” (Dt 10:15-16).

Even Christians are “a chosen people” (1 P 2:9). “We remember brothers and sisters, the circumstances of your being called” declares Paul to the Thessalonians (1 Thes 1:4).

“Truly I realize that God—as Peter says—does not show partiality” (Acts 10:34), so what is the point of talking about election?

The choices of God do not follow human criteria. They do not presuppose any merit but are dictated by gratuitous love. God is linked to Israel, not because it was the most numerous of the people—it was indeed the smallest—but simply for love (Dt 7:5-8). To the Christians of his community, James recalls the behavior of God: “God did not choose the poor of this world to receive the riches of faith and to inherit the kingdom” (Jas 2:5).

When God calls a person or chooses a people, He entrusts them with a task, a mission, to make them carriers of his blessings intended for all.

So Abraham has to become “a blessing to all the families of the earth.” Israel, the servant of the Lord, is charged to “bring justice to the nations” (Is 42:1), and Paul is a “chosen instrument to carry the name of Christ before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

The vocations of God does not confer any privilege. They do not offer any reason to feel superior or better than others. They are a request for availability to serve, to become mediators of salvation.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Let us understand, Lord, how great and challenging is the mission to which you have called us.”

----- 1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel -----

First Reading: Genesis 12:1-4

There are almost two billion people in the world who consider Abraham their father in faith. The fate of this character—whose historical figure is hard to define because it is lost in the mists of time—is truly unique. For the Jews, Christians, and Muslims he is the symbol of the believer, the model of a man faithful to God. His name—which means “the father loves” or “the father is exalted”—evokes perhaps the worship of God Father worshiped by his ancestors in Mesopotamia, his native land.

He lived in Ur of the Chaldeans. “My father was a wandering Aramean”—Israel will forever remember in her profession of faith (Dt 26:5). The names of his family members, the geographical framework, customs, legal practices, the type of religion, the stories of migrations suggest to chronologically place him in the first half of the second millennium B.C.

At some point in his life, a radical change took place. He was forced to leave his land and his family and travel to an unknown country. We can try to reconstruct what happened historically.

Mesopotamia was very fertile, watered by two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. With Egypt, it was the region’s richest and advanced in the world. They had developed very advanced agricultural techniques. There were superior schools, an efficient state organization, and very wise laws. (It is enough to remember the famous Code of Hammurabi.) They had courts where justice was administered with fairness. It would have been a happy land if it had not been often invaded by semi-nomadic people who lived in the West, on the edge of the desert or by people from the East who came down from the highlands. The upheavals that followed in these occupations cause movements of groups, clans, and tribes. The family of Abraham was probably involved in one of these forced migrations that took place at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.

How did Abraham experience this change produced in his life?

The biblical text gives us a theological reading of the facts: Abraham was able to capture God’s will in the events that involved him. He realized that the Lord was calling him to a great mission and he gave his trusting assent. He saw what was happening (although painful, dramatic, shocking) a plan of the Lord. He trusted and let himself be guided by him.

The passage that is being proposed today occupies a key place in the history of salvation. It marks the

beginning of a new chapter for all of the humanity.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis present the story of the origin of the world, man, sin, the flood and the Tower of Babel. Then the sacred author focuses on an individual and his family. They will occupy the rest of the book.

Suddenly, without any premonitory warning, the Lord enters the scene. He directs to Abraham a peremptory order “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, for the land I will show you” (v. 1).

There is no mention of the time, place, circumstances, state of mind with which the patriarch had experienced meeting God. It is an invitation to grasp in this call the story of the arduous spiritual journey proposed to every believer.

In the advice of a true friend, in an inner communication, during a spiritual retreat, while one contemplates a sunset in solitude, in the happy or sad event that messes up plans and dreams, God speaks. He perhaps invites to abandon the routine in which, more than living, one survives. He asked to detach from the past, from habits that, though they do not render us honor, they even gave some gratification. God does not accept that man gives up and adapts himself to false balances. He intervenes and promises a new, diverse and authentic life but also challenging and accompanied by the unexpected. For this reason, there is no wonder that the memory and even the regret of the land left behind remain for a long time.

The Lord does not immediately reveal to Abraham where he wants to lead him. He does not indicate either the difficult stages that he will go through because he would be afraid and would be discouraged.

God behaves in the same way with every person. He calls him to conversion and only gradually he indicates the steps that must be done. Moment by moment, day after day, God invited him to give his answer, to say his “yes” to the Father who is guiding him.

The promises of God are at the center of the passage (vv. 2-3). He speaks nothing but blessings from beginning to the end. This term occurs five times and only incidentally mentions the curse. The blessing is extended to all the families of the earth. That it’s all unconditional must be stressed. It is not related to human response; it does not depend on his faithfulness. God promises to implement the good in anyway.

In the context of the book of Genesis, this data is particularly significant because it is placed after the sin of man. After, with a bold anthropomorphism, it was said that “the wickedness of man on the earth was great and that evil was always the only thought of his heart” (Gen 6:5-6) after the men at Babel had even implemented the attempt to make the ascent to heaven.

Here is God’s answer to sin: not resignation, but the call of Abraham, the choice of an “elected” (Ne 9:7), a faithful servant through whom he will start a new love story and convey a blessing to all humankind.

Throughout the scene, Abraham remained silent. He did not say a word, did not ask for explanations nor make any comment. He listened in silence.

The story ends with the laconic remark: “Then Abraham left as the Lord told him” (v. 4). A few words but enough to express the full adhesion of the patriarch to God’s plan and to demonstrate his total confidence in him.

It is the attitude of listening, docility, conversion, availability to implement courageous “departures” that the Lord expects, especially during Lent, from every believer.

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 1:8b-10

Timothy was still very young when he decided to devote his life to the cause of the gospel. He is good and enjoys the esteem of all, but is also quite shy.

When this letter is sent, he is already for several years bishop of Ephesus, one of the major cities of the Roman Empire. Things are going pretty bad for communities across the region. There are serious difficulties. The first persecutions are in action. Many Christians waver in their faith and start to desert the community encounters. They turn their gaze and interests on the goods of this world.

In the passage taken from today’s reading, the author wants to encourage these sorely tried disciples. He reminds them that faithfulness to Christ involves substantial risks and also much suffering. God does not usually lead people through comfortable paths.

The life of Abraham was not easy, so also the life of Christ, Paul, and Timothy. The lives of Christians will never be easy.

In the second part of the reading (vv. 9-10), it emphasizes the fact that the Christian vocation is completely free of charge. Men cannot do anything to deserve it because it is pure gift. This truth should awaken feelings of gratitude to God and a speedy adhesion to his call.

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

This passage is sometimes interpreted as a brief preview of the experience of paradise, granted by Jesus to a group of friends, preparing them to endure the ordeal of his passion and death.

One should always be very cautious when approaching a text of the Gospel because of that which, at first glance, seems to be a chronicle of facts, at a closer look, it often reveals itself a text of theology drawn up according to the canons of biblical language. The account of the Transfiguration of Jesus reported almost identically by Mark and Luke is an example.

Today, Matthew’s version is proposed to us. It opens with a seemingly irrelevant entry: “After six

days.” After what? It is not said, but the reference seems to be the most likely debate about the identity of Jesus that occurred in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:13-20). One even wonders why Jesus takes with him only three disciples and why to go up on a mountain.

Let’s start with this last detail. This is a curious fact, especially in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus, when he does or says something important, goes up on a mountain: The Last Temptation takes place on the Mount (Mt 4:8); the beatitudes are spoken on the Mount (Mt 5:1); he multiplied the loaves on the Mount (Mt 15:29) and, at the end of the gospel, when the disciples encounter the risen Christ and are sent into the world, they were “on the mountain that had been indicated to them” (Mt 27:16).

Just scroll through the Old Testament to find out the reason for such insistence. The mountain, in the Bible—as, indeed, among all peoples of antiquity—was the site of the encounter with God. It was on the mountain that Moses had the manifestation of God and received the revelation that later was passed on to the people. It was also at the top of Horeb that Elijah met the Lord.

There’s more. If we read Exodus 24 we find that of Moses it was said, “after six days” (Ex 24:16), he did not go alone, but took Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu with him (Ex 24:1,9), and was enveloped in a cloud. On the mountain, even his face was transfigured by the splendor of God’s glory (Ex 34:30).

In light of these texts, the aim of the evangelist is clear. He intends to present Jesus as the new Moses, as the one who delivers the new law to the new people, represented by the three disciples. Jesus is the definitive revelation of God.

The shining face and bright robes (v. 2). These are also the reasons that recur often in the Bible. The Lord is “covered with majesty and splendor, wrapped in light as with a garment,” says the Psalmist (Ps 104:1-2). They are images which affirm the presence of God in the person of Jesus.

The meaning of the luminous cloud that envelops all with its shadow is identical (v. 5). The book of Exodus speaks of a luminous cloud that protected the people of Israel in the desert (Ex 13:21), a sign of God’s presence that accompanied his people along the way. When Moses received the law, the mountain was enveloped by a cloud (Ex 24:15-16). He also came down with the shining face (Ex 39:29-35). Cloud and shining face are therefore a reflection of God’s presence.

Using these images, Matthew says that Peter, James, and John, in a particularly significant moment of their lives, have been introduced to the world of God and have enjoyed an enlightenment that made them understand the true identity of the Master and the destination of his journey. He would not be the glorious Messiah they expected, but a Messiah who, after a severe conflict with the religious power, would be opposed, persecuted and killed. They also realized that their fate would be no different from that of the Master.

The voice from heaven (v. 5) is a literary expression frequently used by the rabbis to end a long discussion on a theme and present the thought of God.

The topic discussed in the previous chapter (Mt 16) concerned the identity of Jesus. The Master himself had opened the debate with the question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13). After exposing the various opinions, the apostles, by the mouth of Peter, had expressed their

conviction that he is the long-awaited messiah. The voice from the sky now declares the opinion of God: “Jesus is the beloved”, the faithful servant of whom God is well pleased (Is 42:1).

This “voice” that declared the same words was already heard at baptism. “This is my beloved Son” (Mt 3:17). Now an exhortation is added: “Listen to him.” Listen to him, even when he seems to propose too demanding paths, to indicate the narrow and steep ways, paradoxical and humanly absurd choices.

In the Bible, the word “to listen” does not just mean “to hear” but is often equivalent to “to obey” (Ex 6:12, Mt 18:15-16). The recommendation that the Father gives to Peter, James, and John, and through them, to all the disciples, is “to put into practice” that what Jesus teaches. It is the invitation to focus one’s life on the proposal of the beatitude.

Who are Moses and Elijah? The first is the one who gave the Law to his people; the other was considered the first of the prophets. For the Israelites, these two characters represented the Holy Scriptures.

All the holy books of Israel are meant to lead to a dialogue with Jesus; they orient toward him. Without him, the Old Testament is incomprehensible, but also Jesus, without the Old Testament, remains a mystery. On Easter day, to make the meaning of his death and resurrection clear to his disciples, he will resort to the Old Testament: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them everything in the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:27).

The meaning of the image of the three tents is not easy to determine. Sure they refer to the path of the exodus and here they indicate, perhaps, the desire of Peter to stop, to perpetuate the joy experienced in a moment of spiritual intimacy with the Master. Who builds a tent wants to fix his abode in one place and not move, at least for a time. Jesus instead is always on the move. He goes directly to a destination and the disciples must follow him.

Our own spiritual experience can help us to understand. After having spoken at length with God, we are not willing to go back to everyday life: the problems, social conflicts and family disagreements, the dramas we must confront frighten us, yet we know that listening to the word of God is not everything. One cannot spend one’s life in the church or in the oasis of spiritual retreats. It is necessary to go out to meet and serve the brothers and sisters, to help those who suffer, to be close to anyone in need of love.

After discovering in prayer the way to go, it is necessary to put oneself in following Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem to offer his life.

Let us summarize the meaning of the scene: the whole Old Testament (Moses and Elijah) receives direction from Jesus. Peter does not understand the meaning of what is happening. Although in words he proclaims Jesus as “the Christ” (Mt 16:16), he remains profoundly convinced that he is just a great character, a man at the level of Moses and Elijah, for this he suggests that three equal tents be built.

God intervenes to correct the false interpretation of Peter: Jesus is not just a great legislator or a mere prophet, he is the “beloved Son” of the Father.

The three characters cannot continue to be together any longer. Jesus stands out clearly from the others and is absolutely superior. Israel had listened to the voice of the Lord which had been transmitted by Moses and the prophets. Now this voice—Peter says—comes to people through Christ. It is he and him alone that the disciples should listen to. It is noted that, when the three look up, they see no others but Jesus. Moses and Elijah are gone, they have already accomplished their mission: they have presented to the world the Messiah, the new prophet, the new lawgiver.

The promise made to the people by Moses before his death is surprisingly realized: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like myself from among the people, from your brothers, to whom you shall listen” (Dt 18:15).

See more at: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.UN58ukKp.dpuf>

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