

Commentary to the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Who has a big heart is not content with a small house



Introduction

The Hebrew word house does not indicate only the building but also the family, the cell of the society in which, especially in ancient times, the individual found asylum and felt welcomed and protected. Man can't do without this double house: "Some things you cannot live without: water, bread, clothes and a house for shelter" (Sir 29:21). For this reason, in the Middle East, hospitality is always sacred, as the insistent recommendation of the Bible attest: "Welcome one another into your houses without complaining" (1 Pt 4:9); "Do not neglect to offer hospitality; you know that some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).

One wants to start a new family, however, is required to separate from his own home: "A man leaves his father and mother and is attached to his wife, and with her becomes one flesh." (Gen 2:24). It is an abandonment that leads to a meeting intended to give continuity to life.

One day, even Jesus abandoned the security provided by the home of Nazareth. "Foxes have holes and

birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). He also left the family: ““Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” Then he pointed to his disciples and said, ‘Look! Here are my mother and my brothers’” (Mt 12:48-50).

To those who want to follow him, he asks the same responsibility: the courage to take a break, to take the flight toward a higher reality, to be introduced in a new home, in a new family, the family of God’s children.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“In the disciple, it is Jesus who knocks at our door and asks for hospitality.”

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

First Reading: 2 Kings 4:8-11,14-16a

On an always sunny slope, where the Moré hill degrades towards the fertile plain of Esdraelon, favored by an abundant source of water, there rose, since ancient times, the city of Shunem. It was famous mainly because the Philistines camped in it before beating Saul (1 Sam 28:4) and for being the birthplace of Abishag, the attractive girl who had taken care of the old David (1 Kgs 1:3). At the time of Elisha, Shunem was inhabited by wealthy landowners and it was in the home of one of these that the narrated episode of the reading is set.

The prophet, who used to pass by this city, had befriended a married couple, already advanced in years and no children. It was especially the elderly lady who harbored esteem and affection for the man of God. Knowing that he came from far away and that he was homeless and without family, she felt for him a great tenderness. She shared his mission and welcomed him with the kindness of a mother. In accord with her husband, she had a small room built for him on the top floor, in brickwork. There she had placed a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp.

The lady, obviously rich enough, could have simply given a bit of money to Elisha, and then let him go on his way. Instead—and this is the thing to note—she did not just hand him some help, she welcomed him into their home, she wanted him to feel as a member of her family.

The woman’s gesture is pleasing to God and to show her how much he appreciated her solidarity with the prophet and what blessings he reserves for those who collaborate with those who announces his word, he granted her the greatest joy she could aspire: he gave her a son.

Elisha represents the apostles who, even today, leave their land, family, a life perhaps wealthy and peaceful and choose to devote themselves totally to the service of God and the gospel. More than the material support, they need to feel the friendly presence of people who share their ideals, of people who, especially in times of trouble, discouragement, and loneliness, know how to support them and be close to them.

Second Reading: Romans 6:3-4,8-11

Baptism was a very common ritual in Jesus’ time. Those who followed the Baptist were baptized.

Those who renounced paganism and chose the religion of Israel, who entered into a religious sect and even the slaves to whom the masters conceded the freedom were also baptized. It was a gesture that indicated a radical change of life: a death to the past and a rebirth.

Even Christian baptism has basically the same meaning. It is better understood if one considers that, in the early church, the adults were the ones who, at Easter Vigil, were baptized. They were pagans who, with the immersion in water of a tub, they intended to bury a past marked by violence, hatred, adultery, theft, corruption, immorality, and, rising from the water, they showed to be new people, ready to follow the way of Christ.

The waters of the baptismal font were considered the waters of the womb of the community that generated new children of God.

What Paul says in the important passage that is proposed to us in the reading is thus understood: “Through baptism, we are buried with Christ so we begin walking in a new life” (v. 4). The passage from death to life has been trodden primarily by Christ, then, behind him, by every disciple.

In the last verse, the Apostle indicates the practical consequences of this event: If baptism is the day of rebirth, it also marks the beginning of a whole new moral life; the Christian cannot continue to do the things of the old life; he must consider himself “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11).

Gospel: Mt 10:37-42

The second of the five discourses of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew develops the themes related to sending of the disciples to a mission. Today we are offered the concluding passage.

In the first part (vv. 37-39) the demands of discipleship are presented in all their harshness. Radical and unprecedented renuncements are required. To make matters worse, each of them is accompanied by a severe and drastic statement, marked like a refrain, “is not worthy of me!” No rabbi has ever claimed so much to those who followed him. Perhaps for this, one day the Jews have asked Jesus: “Who do you claim to be?” (Jn 8:53). Above all, he demands from his disciple the radical departure even from the more intimate and natural affections, such as love for parents and for the children.

His request is placed in the context of the paradoxical images used in the last part of the discourse. He has just said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Mt 10:34).

After having declared blessed the peacemakers (Mt 5:9), and having invited to love the enemies (Mt 6:44), Jesus certainly cannot incite physical aggression towards the enemies. The sword that causes division and conflict is his word, what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews calls “living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword; it pierces to the division of soul and spirit, and judges the intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). It is the sword Simeon was referring to in his prophecy made to Mary (Lk 2:35).

Jesus does not intend to deny the Torah of Moses, which commands to honor father and mother. In fact, he has repeatedly stressed the commandment (Mt 15:4). However, he is aware that he came “for the falling and rising of many in Israel, a sign of contradiction; and a sword will pierce your own soul,

so that, out of many hearts, thoughts may be revealed” (Lk 2:34-35). He knows that his word will cause misunderstandings, disagreements, and tensions within the same families.

Matthew wrote his Gospel in a time of persecution. The disciples have often had the experience that, to remain faithful to Christ, they had to accept the breaking of ties with the people who matter most. The rabbis had made the decision to expel from the synagogues, to exclude from the chosen people those who consider Jesus the Messiah. They had ordered that those who adhered to the Christian faith, considered heretical, be disowned by their families. The consequences of this exclusion were severe and painful, not only from the emotional point of view but also social and economic.

Jesus demands from the disciple the courage to remain without support, without protection, and without material security for the sake of his Gospel. Then, he continues with another request, even more dramatic: the willingness not only to lose it all but also to give up their lives. The image of the cross refers to the inevitable consequences which goes to meet those who want to live according to the dictates of the Gospel: like the Master, he will meet the cross, that is, the hostility of the world. Even if life will not be removed with martyrdom, he must give it in a constant and generous self-sacrifice.

“He came to His own, yet His own did not receive him” (Jn 1:11). It was this man’s response to the hosting request made by God. It is a fate that often touched Jesus (Lk 9:53) and it is the one that awaits the disciples sent by him (Mt 10:14).

In the second part of the passage (vv. 40-42) a remarkable promise to those who welcome the preachers of the gospel is reported. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes him who sent me” (v. 40). This is not just material hospitality, such as that offered by the woman of Shunem to Elisha, but the reception of the message. The rabbis said: “The envoy of a man is like the man himself.” Jesus intends to affirm the authority conferred by him to his disciple: in the disciple’s words resound the voice of the Master and, through him, the Father’s.

It is at this point that the theme introduced by the first reading is resumed. Whoever receives the prophet, for the fact of being a prophet, will receive a prophet’s reward. Even a simple gesture of love as to offer a cup of cold water to a disciple, though small, with no appearance, no prestigious titles, will not remain unrewarded.

Not everyone has received from God the same qualities and the same gifts. However, in different ways, but with the same generosity, every true believer is called to give his/her contribution and support for those who dedicate themselves directly to the proclamation of the word of God. Even before the material help, these persons need to hear that their efforts are appreciated by the brothers and sisters in the faith and that their message is assimilated.

This reception is to be revealed in a special way to those who have renounced to having a “home”, to build a family, not to escape, to live isolated and far from the world but to belong to every family, to be fully available to Christ and the brothers and sisters. How is their service estimated? How are they inserted in our community? Does each family consider them members or consider them strangers? How is gratitude manifested towards the work they generously perform?

