

## Commentary to the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A –

### HOW TO HELP GOD FIND HIS TREASURE



#### Introduction

The mentality of this world evaluates people based on the success they get, the qualities they have and the wealth they accumulate. It influences Christians in a subtle, almost imperceptible way like a snake creeping between the cracks of a rock. The genius, athletes, eminent personalities, anyone who proves to possess special aptitudes are sought after and admired. The weak, the poor, the unskilled, the handicapped seem to many people—even if it is difficult to admit—almost a cumbersome baggage .

The community that boasts of its "heroes" and feels an unacknowledged rejection of sinners, considers them ballast, dry branches, a "disgrace" for the whole family. It shows to have assimilated the criteria of this world, not those of God who is in love with the last, those who do not count. He declared his love to the most insignificant of the people, Israel, thus: "You are precious in my sight, and important – for I have loved you" (Is 43:4).

The prospect of Jesus is identical: "the small ones" are at the center of his community's attention. They are God's treasure, the precious pearl for which it is worth to scour every corner of the world; the jewel that brings overflowing joy to whoever finds it (Mt 13:44-46). The rabbis said: "The Lord rejoices in the resurrection of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked." The God of Jesus is

more pleased when a sinner returns than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray (Mt 18:13).

Only if we are included among the righteous of God who "has chosen the poor" (Jas 2:5) and turns his gaze on the humble (Is 66:2), we are in the right disposition to grasp the message of today's readings.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

*"Experience the joy of the Lord who brings a brother to life."*

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospe-----

### **First reading: Ezekiel 33:7-9**

"Do I want the death of the sinner?—says the Lord God. Do I not rather want him to turn from his ways and live?" (Ez 18:23). The concern of the Lord is that man chooses paths of death. For this he appoints Ezekiel as a watchman and instructs him to watch (v. 7). Against who?—we ask. Who is the approaching enemy who threatens to annihilate Israel?

Although it may seem strange, it is the Lord who is about to strike his people with the most serious of misfortunes: the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the deportation of its citizens to a foreign land.

What must Ezekiel do? He must act as the sentinels sounding the trumpet, giving the alarm so that everyone can get to safety.

The image of the coming of the Lord to punish the people frequently occurs in the Bible. To almost every precept there is added a promise of good to whoever observes it and the threat of punishment for offenders (Dt 28). God does not actually punish. It is sin that leads man to destruction. The Lord wants to save; who turns away from the path of life God traced decrees his own death.

In today's passage, the passion and care of God for people are highlighted in a dramatic way. The salvation of his people is much at God's heart. He holds Ezekiel under threat of death if he will not alert the Israelites and not put them on guard against the danger they face. They are making choices that will lead them to ruin.

The Prophet is a man with a strong spiritual sensitivity. He is the first one to understand the ways of the Lord. He can immediately assess whether the decisions of people are in compliance with or against the thought of God. Therefore it is his duty to intervene, to speak with candor and admonish one who is in danger of turning away from God. If he does not fulfill this mission, he is responsible for the ruin of his brothers (v. 8). If instead he gets back to the one who behaves badly, and this person does not listen, then he is not guilty (v. 9).

Every Christian is prophet, a sentinel, and therefore partly responsible of the fate of his brothers and sisters.

## **Second Reading: Romans 13:8-10**

In chapter 13 of the Letter to the Romans, Paul deals with the duties of the citizen toward the authority of the state. Christians wondered to what extent should their loyalty reach? What position to take in front of institutions incompatible with the gospel of Christ? How to deal with an eccentric emperor like Nero? Many were dissatisfied with the current political system and maybe some Christians were among those who thought of revolting.

In the opening verses of the chapter (vv. 1-7) Paul exhorts everyone not get involved in risks, to act as exemplary citizens, respectful of the leaders, laws and property of the state.

In the second part (vv. 8-10) that which is resumed in today's reading-Paul enunciates a general principle that helps to solve not only this, but any moral problem.

When one does not know how to behave or unsure about the choices to be made, one must refer to the commandment, which heads all the law: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 9). All other precepts derive from it. They are nothing more than its detailed specification. Who tries to do always and only for the good of his brother, certainly observes all the commandments. If one keeps this principle in mind, it is easy to understand that all laws of the state, when they promote common good, must be observed and it would be a sin to break them. However, if a law (of the state, the church or any other institution) is contrary to this precept, the Christian has not only the right but the duty to disobey.

## **Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20**

In order not to misinterpret the meaning of this passage, it is necessary to place it in its context. The whole chapter from which it is taken (Mt 18) is about the rapports between the members of the Christian community: who should be considered the first, great and small, how to avoid scandals, what attitudes to take towards one who turns away from the faith, how to develop love and promote harmony among the disciples, how often must one grant forgiveness.

Today we are invited to reflect on Jesus' recommendations on how to recover one who failed or got lost. To understand them one has to read them in the light of the sentence that introduces it. Unfortunately, it is not reported in today's Gospel: "Your Father in heaven doesn't want even one of these little ones to perish" (v. 14). All that is recommended must respond to this one goal, to bring back to life those who have made or are making choices of death.

It is up to the shepherd, of course, to search for the sheep that is lost, wounded and in risk of falling in a very deep and dark ravine. However, every Christian is a shepherd of his brother. No one can say like Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gén 4:9).

The law of love requires a commitment to bring the brother on the right path; but how to proceed in such a delicate issue?

There is a mistake that must be avoided: gossiping, spreading the news of the error. This is defamation. It serves only to marginalize one who did wrong, to humiliate him. It makes him increasingly stubborn

in evil and to needlessly make him suffer. It is equivalent to losing forever the opportunity to recover him.

There is someone who thinks that, having spoken the truth, he can put his mind at rest. But the truth is not the absolute value. Love is the reference point. The truth can object to love, can destroy the coexistence and good relations, rather than promote them. Defamation can destroy a person: "The lash of the tongue shatters bones" (Sir 28:17)—kills a brother or sister, ruins a family, breaks a relationship. How can one deny that there is wisdom in the popular saying: "Better a well said lie than an inappropriate truth."

The truth that does not produce love, but causes anxiety, creates dissension, hatred and resentment is a lie. One cannot tell everything that is true or everything one knows. One must not, above all, tell the truth to those who want to use it for evil. The truth that kills is evil; it comes from the evil one, "who has been a murderer from the beginning. He is a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44).

Let's see what Jesus suggests to "tell the truth" to a brother who is in danger of being lost. The path to follow is split up into three stages.

First: one has to talk personally to the brother, man to man, face to face. Everything must be resolved in secret, to prevent someone from finding out what happened.

This first attempt is the most delicate, first of all, because it is demanding and decidedly unwelcomed. All prefer to confide in others rather than confront the person concerned. Then it is not easy to find the right words. One can wrongly broach the subject, an exaggerated adjective may be uttered inadvertently. Sometimes an out of place emphasis puts an end to all. If the brother is injured, he finally closes. One may have acted with the best of intentions, besides losing a friend, one also feels responsible of the failure to convert.

In this situation, today's second reading offers a thought that may be helpful: to put ourselves in the same situation and try to imagine what we would want others to do for us.

If this first attempt does not produce the desired result, the second step to take is to ask for help from one or two sensible and wise brothers of the community. Never forget the goal: the recovery of the brother. One should never give the impression of cornering him or putting him in front of someone who looks for ways to convict. He must perceive that he is dealing with friends who want his good and willing to testify in front of the brothers of his good disposition.

The last stage is the recourse to the community. This can happen only when the sin committed risks to disturb the brothers and sisters, especially those who are weak in the faith. If so and the culprit does not want to amend, then he must be considered "as a heathen and as a publican."

Taken literally, this recommendation squeals out of Jesus' lips, who has just warned the disciples: "See that you do not despise any of these little ones" (v. 10). How is it possible that "the friend of publicans and sinners" (Mt 11:19) pronounce a very hard judgment?

If it is not understood in the right way, the phrase is strange even in the gospel of Matthew where one

often finds that the church is not composed only of saints, but also of sinners. It is a field where wheat and weeds grow. It is a net that takes all types of fish. It is a feast where good and bad are welcomed. How does one explain that the unrepentant sinners should be driven out by the community?

We do not put a phrase of Jesus at odds with the rest of the gospel. A fact is certain: the community does not have the right to expel one of its members who behaves badly, just for the fact that it feels him like a burden, as an inconvenient item. The sinner is always a son and no mother is ashamed of her child. However one cannot deny that the Church has the right and even the duty to speak words of denunciation or condemnation. Jesus has given her the power to bind and to loose, and has promised to ratify her decisions from heaven (v. 18).

Binding and loosing is a well known phrase. It was used by the rabbis to indicate their authority to declare lawful or forbidden a certain moral behavior and to impose or revoke the exclusion from the community.

The responsibility entrusted to the church is great. She is called to authentically declare what thoughts, feelings, choices are in accordance with the gospel and which one moves away from Christ. She does not cast out, condemn nor punish anyone but only helps one to become aware of the condition in which everyone stands in taking certain decisions.

In the fulfillment of this delicate mission, the church will never forget another stern saying of the Lord: "How can you say to your neighbor, friend, let me take the speck out of your eye, when you can't remove the log in your own? You hypocrite! First remove the log from your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your neighbor's eye" (Lk 6:41-42). However it is her duty to unequivocally declare, after being confronted with the gospel, the one she places outside the communion with Christ and with the community.

The way to perform this service can and must change depending on the sensitivity and pedagogical concepts which—as we know—are subject to evolution through the centuries. There was a time in which they proceeded in a rather strict way: "who committed serious moral failing was removed from the community" (1 Cor 5:1-5). It was feared that ignoring or passing over in silence outrageous public behavior, and sometimes even ostentatious, would likely confuse the weaker members. So, too, if someone falsified the gospel, he was publicly reprehended: "If anyone promotes sects in the church, warn him once and then a second time....if he still continues...expel him" (Ti 3:10). The community cannot certainly tolerate that someone, in the name of Christ preach insane doctrines.

Today these forms of excommunication are no longer practiced. The pastoral choices are different, but the goal remains the same: to enlighten the brother, to help him realize his condition and get him to mend. "If someone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note and do not have anything to do with him, so that he may be ashamed. However, do not treat him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thes 3:14-15). To achieve this result one should be clear that the measures taken against him are dictated only by love, not by the desire to "separate him" from a community that considers herself perfect. If one can make him aware of the fact that he is no longer in full communion with the brothers in the faith, one can arouse in him a healthy nostalgia for the Father's house and the desire and the need to return can emerge in him.

The concluding verses (vv. 19-20) are a last reminder of the value attributed by Jesus to "getting together" and seeking agreement among the members of the community. The harmony, the unity of purpose manifest themselves in the consciousness of the presence of the Risen Lord in their midst and with him in prayer they turn to the Father. Only one who has entered in harmony of thoughts and feelings with God and with the brothers and sisters can feel safe to interpret the mind of the Lord when "he binds" and when "he looses".

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