
OCTOBER 17, 2019

Thursday of the 28th Week of Ordinary Time

Memorial of St. Ignatius of Antioch

Rom 3:21-30

Ps 130:1b-6ab

Lk 11:47-54

Paul brings his presentation in Rom 1:18-3:20 to a close with a dramatic statement: “Jews and Greeks alike ... are all under the domination of sin” (Rom 3:9). If this is so, it seems that there is no possibility of salvation for anyone, relying only on human capacities. But Paul believes that the intervention of the God of Jesus Christ has overcome this desperate situation of humanity: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested” (Rom 3:21). Thus Paul contrasts the saving power of God with the slavery of sin. The Father’s powerful liberating work takes place in the present time, for his free initiative has taken historical form in Christ who died and rose again (see Rom 3:24-25, 4:25). When a person adheres to it in faith (see Rom 3:22-28:30), her existence changes completely: she is freed from subordination to the power of sin and death (see Rom 3:24) and lives as a faithful companion of God and neighbor, according to the logic of solidarity proper to the covenant, that is, as “righteous” (Rom 3:26).

Here Paul presents a theology totally opposed to that of the mentality of his time. Late Judaism had reduced the divine Law to absolute domination, disconnecting it from its constitutive and original relationship with history and the divine covenant, assuming it to be valid in itself. The result was that it substituted obedience to Yahweh with the meticulous and scrupulous observance of prescriptions and prohibitions. This way of thinking led to a bloated self-sufficiency of humanity before the destiny of one’s

life. Redemption on the basis of “works of the Law,” typical of rabbinic Judaism, in fact made humanity a sort of religious autocrat, oblivious of divine and self-referential grace. The resulting sectarian and exclusivist attitude drew a clear line of distinction between Jews, who understood and observed the Law, and pagans, who were destined for perdition because they lacked the Law.

The Apostle presents us with a theological understanding of justification as an alternative to this Jewish teaching of his day. He appeals to God’s salvific justice and points to faith as the only possibility of redemption from the dominion of sin and from the destiny of eternal death. In practice, Paul rejects the severe image of a God without mercy, revealing instead God’s true face, that of a Father who acts and intervenes out of love on behalf of sinful humanity. Before this extraordinary initiative of God, Jews and pagans stand on level ground; both need salvation as a gift and are constantly called to faith because both are under the law of sin. In this universalizing process of conversion, Israel is saved and regains its rightful place in the divine election (see Rom 9-11). It will be saved together with all the peoples of the earth. The election of Israel becomes an effective sign of the historical beginning of salvation for Israelites and pagans together.

Pope Francis writes:

On the basis of this sharing in Jesus’ way of seeing things, Saint Paul has left us a description of the life of faith. In accepting the gift of faith, believers become a new creation; they receive a new being; as God’s children, they are now “sons in the Son.” The phrase “Abba, Father,” so characteristic of Jesus’ own experience, now becomes the core of the Christian experience (cf. Rom 8:15). The life of faith, as a filial existence, is the acknowledgment of a primordial and radical gift which upholds our lives. We see this clearly in Saint Paul’s question to the Corinthians: “What have you that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). This was at the very heart of Paul’s debate with the Pharisees: the issue of whether salvation is attained by faith or by the works of the law. Paul rejects the attitude

of those who would consider themselves justified before God on the basis of their own works. Such people, even when they obey the commandments and do good works, are centered on themselves; they fail to realize that goodness comes from God. Those who live this way, who want to be the source of their own righteousness, find that the latter is soon depleted and that they are unable even to keep the law. They become closed in on themselves and isolated from the Lord and from others; their lives become futile and their works barren, like a tree far from water. Saint Augustine tells us in his usual concise and striking way: “*Ab eo qui fecit te, noli deficere nec ad te*,” “Do not turn away from the one who made you, even to turn towards yourself.” Once I think that by turning away from God I will find myself, my life begins to fall apart (cf. Lk 15:11-24). The beginning of salvation is openness to something prior to ourselves, to a primordial gift that affirms life and sustains it in being. Only by being open to and acknowledging this gift can we be transformed, experience salvation and bear good fruit. Salvation by faith means recognizing the primacy of God’s gift. As Saint Paul puts it: “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8).

(Lumen Fidei, 19)

Paul proposes to the Romans the universal horizons of the grace of God, which are at the base of the mission entrusted to him and communicated to the Church, born of the Passover of Jesus and sent to the world by the Spirit of the Risen Lord.