
OCTOBER 26, 2019

Saturday of the 29th Week of Ordinary Time

Weekday

Rom 8:1-11

Ps 24:1b-4ab,5-6

Lk 13:1-9

The teaching of Jesus in today's Gospel begins with a story that is reported to him by some people about a group of Galileans massacred by Pilate while offering a sacrifice in the Temple. Not only was the outrage committed within the walls of the Temple, but human blood was mixed with that of the sacrificed animals, which provoked further shame and indignation. It is not clear why these people tell Jesus about the episode. Perhaps it's because Jesus himself was a Galilean and they wanted to warn him, just as they did a bit later regarding the persecution of Herod Antipas, who wanted to kill him. Or maybe they were subtly threatening him, suggesting that if he were reported to the Roman prosecutor, he would suffer the same fate. Or maybe they're just passing along some gossip about the tragedies of others; as the psalm says, people who rejoice in the troubles of others should be ashamed.

But Jesus' answer suggests the presence of something even more serious: a condescending judgment towards the victims, as if they deserved to die so violently while they were at prayer, and as if the brutality of the Romans was a judgment of God on those who were killed. Jesus does not comment on the event, but draws a lesson from the attitude of those who report the sad episode. No one, he says, is authorized to interpret the suffering, illness, accidents, or tragedies of others as a divine punishment for sins committed, but everyone must consider their sins as the worst misfortune and try to

convert with sincere repentance. No one has been given the authority to judge and divide people between “good” and “bad.” Only the Lord knows all the truth of our hearts.

As soon as the news is communicated to him, Jesus immediately rejects the suggestion that there is a causal link between violent death and the gravity of sin. Jesus wants to underline that the incidents do not necessarily reveal the gravity of some hidden sin of the victim. Rather, they are like warnings that remind us that death can always knock, even when we least expect it. This is why we must awaken in everyone the necessity and the urgency of interior conversion, to be accepted and carried out before it is too late. This is why Jesus, rejecting the idea that the Galileans slaughtered by Pilate and the eighteen people crushed by the collapse of the tower of Siloam may be considered more sinful than anyone else, continues his discourse by suggesting that if those who listen to him do not convert their hearts, they might perish in the same way. They should convert not because their repentance would protect them from death, but rather because conversion puts them in a good spiritual and human disposition to meet the Lord of life, in total serenity and peace of heart. The death from which conversion frees us is the eternal one, not the physical one. The image of God at the base of the idea that violent death reveals a serious sin in the victim does not correspond to the Father God revealed by Jesus. This is not a God who takes revenge on sinners, but a patient God who hopes that, given the necessary time, humanity will come to realize how radical is the love with which it is loved, and that this will bear the fruits of fraternal love and solidarity that it should.

In any case, this is the perspective suggested by the parable, the theological point that is dramatized in the story of a landowner, his fig tree, and his gardener. Disappointed by not receiving the fruit that he expected after so many years of care and work, the man decides to cut down his fig tree rather than let it waste the space it was planted in. But, surprisingly, his gardener intervenes, asking to give the fig tree more time, enough to

see whether working the land and adding more fertilizer might help. Jesus doesn't conclude the story, but he seems to suggest that the verdict is suspended, opening the way to hope. If we see ourselves reflected in the image of the fig tree, the good news is that the time of our lives given to us by the Master of the universe gives us an opportunity to let divine grace act and produce its fruits of peace, joy, justice, and love in us. It's a gift, a sort of second chance that leaves little room for error. On the other hand, if we see ourselves in the figure of the gardener, it's a reminder that we must intercede and make efforts toward the conversion of others. As an ecclesial community, it goes without saying that we are called to a two-fold commitment: first, to convert ourselves without ceasing, becoming ever more transparent to the Word of God and docile to the Spirit of love that gives life, and second, to work for the conversion of the world, never obscuring the merciful and patient face of God, Father of Jesus Christ, whose first and only desire is to save and not to condemn. Experience shows that hearts respond more generously when they are shown trust; we do not conquer people for divine love with fear, imprisoning them in their misfortunes. May this pedagogy guide our missionary activity without diminishing its prophetic acuteness or the profound understanding of human nature and the content of salvation.

The image of the fig tree planted in the vineyard suggests, perhaps, that the kingdom of God (the vineyard) is much larger than either Israel or Jerusalem (the fig tree), and that Jesus the Messiah, the divine gardener, came to seek in the Holy City the fruits of mercy, justice, and faithfulness. These are the fruits that God likes, the fruits expected by the "owner of the orchard." But time is running out and the decision to cut down the fig tree is made, because these fruits have not been found. This is also the meaning of the episode of the barren fig tree of Mark (Mk 13:28) and Matthew (Mt 21:18-22; 24:32), which conclude with the curse of the tree.

But surprisingly, in the parable of Luke, it is the gardener who intercedes with the owner, asking him to have a little patience with his fig tree, that

is, to have mercy on Jerusalem. And as if this were not enough, he commits himself to doing everything possible to make this very expensive tree fruitful. Because surely, as the prophet Ezekiel declares in today's Alleluia verse, God takes no pleasure for the death of a wicked person; rather, it is their conversion that he desires, so that they may abandon their wrong path and their life of sin. "Turn, turn from your evil ways! Why should you die, house of Israel?" (Ez 33:11). Unfortunately, the invitation to conversion was not accepted, the warnings were not heard, the signs were not understood, and the time of grace was not embraced. But before the final tragedy of Jerusalem occurred, the Tree of Life itself, Jesus, accepted to be cut down so that, in the end, the root of all evil was torn out and that Tree was planted our hearts, eternally vivifying it with the sap of the Holy Spirit.

Baptised
and sent

October
2019