

25. February 2022

Truth and love towards the erring and the sinner

Jas 5:9-12

Do not make complaints against one another, brothers, so as not to be brought to judgement yourselves; the Judge is already to be seen waiting at the gates. For your example, brothers, in patiently putting up with persecution, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name; remember it is those who had perseverance that we say are the blessed ones. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and understood the Lord's purpose, realising that the Lord is kind and compassionate. Above all, my brothers, do not swear by heaven or by the earth or use any oaths at all. If you mean 'yes', you must say 'yes'; if you mean 'no', say 'no'. Otherwise you make yourselves liable to judgement.

As Christians, how should we treat one another? What is clear - and today's reading confirms this - is that it does not befit love to become the accuser of one's brother. From a human as well as a spiritual point of view, it is disastrous if we focus only on the faults of the other person and are blind to our own mistakes. This leads to a hardening of the heart and an unloving judgemental attitude. This is certainly what the Apostle James is referring to here.

But should we always overlook the faults of others, so that we do not know how to criticise constructively or correct our brother or sister? Some would like to draw this conclusion from today's text!

But this cannot be what the Apostle wants to convey to us, because we also have to work on our own mistakes, and God himself shows them to us in order to help us to improve them. We are also familiar with the "correctio fraterna", which is intended to help our brothers and sisters to continue and improve their journey with Christ.

The decisive point, then, lies in the way we treat each other.

It is essential that we learn to make a distinction, which is not at all easy for some people. We must be able to distinguish between the objective situation and personal or subjective guilt.

Let us suppose, for example, that someone has homosexual inclinations and practices them. The objective situation is that this person is living in grave sin, because

homosexual acts are intrinsically evil. And to bring this to his attention, in case he does not know it, is a work of charity.

Now, it is important that this correction be motivated both by love for the truth and by a sincere concern for this brother. We do not know how he got into this situation, nor do we know whether he fights against those inclinations or justifies them. Therefore, measuring the degree of personal guilt is God's business; but it is up to us to offer him help to get out of that unhealthy lifestyle.

It is a common mistake not to make this distinction between the objective situation and the level of personal guilt, and so we become judges of the other. By rejecting the objective evil, we easily reject and judge the person who commits it as well.

Today's reading tells us of a very different attitude on the part of God: "*the Lord is kind and compassionate*", says the Apostle James. For us, this means that, without falling into the trap of relativising or closing our eyes to the gravity of the objective situation, our inner attitude must always be concerned with helping the other person, seeking his or her salvation. Mercy bends down to offer a helping hand. In the example of homosexuality, it abases the moral misery of the brother. Through our attitude, he is to experience God's love, which on the one hand shows him the way to the truth, and on the other hand reaches out to him with hand and heart, to help him patiently to stand up, to decide for the truth and to let it into his life. Above all, our brother needs our prayer.

What we have said in this example with regard to homosexuality, applies also to other faults. Calling sin by its name is by no means an unloving judgement. Rather, it is true love, which is concerned for the salvation of the other person. But the truth is not to be presented to the person in question as a sharp sword, but always in the attitude of the Lord, who wants to lead the erring and the sinner to the way of truth.