

18. June 2022

The Old Testament in the Light of the New Covenant

2 Cro 24:17-25

After Jehoiada's death the officials of Judah came to pay court to the king, and the king listened to their advice, and they abandoned the Temple of Yahweh, God of their ancestors, for the worship of sacred poles and idols. Judah and Jerusalem incurred wrath because of this guilt of theirs. He sent their prophets to lead them back to Yahweh; these put the case against them, but they would not listen. The spirit of God then invested Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood up before the people and said, 'God says this, "Why transgress Yahweh's commands to your certain ruin? For if you abandon Yahweh, he will abandon you." They then plotted against him and, at the king's order, stoned him in the court of the Temple of Yahweh. Thus King Joash, forgetful of the devotion which Jehoiada father of Zechariah had displayed on his behalf, murdered his son, who cried out as he died, 'Yahweh will see this and avenge it!' At the turn of the year, the Aramaean army made war on Joash. When they reached Judah and Jerusalem, they massacred all the nation's government officials and sent all their booty to the king of Damascus. Although the invading Aramaean army was only a small body of men, Yahweh allowed them to defeat a very large army because they had abandoned Yahweh, God of their ancestors; thus they executed judgement on Joash. After they had retired -- for they left him seriously wounded-- his own retainers plotted against him to avenge the blood of the son of Jehoiada the priest and murdered him in his bed. When he died he was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings.

This reading takes us back to the time of the Old Covenant, in which the consequences of evil deeds and grave sins are clearly shown. Again we hear of the great temptation of the kings to turn to other gods. Not only did they ignore the warnings of the prophets, but, in the person of Zechariah, they even put to death the one who told them the truth. An end that many prophets had to suffer!

Why is it that the Israelites turned so easily to other gods, to idols they neither see nor hear, as the psalm says, to show the absurdity of such worship (cf. Ps 135:16-17)?

Idols are man-made, "*the work of human hands*" (Ps 135:15), and in reality nothing is owed to them. The Covenant with God, on the other hand, implies commitments on the part of man, which form him and require of him an attitude of listening: "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is the only Lord*" (Dt 6:4).

Perhaps without being fully aware of it, man wants to avoid the commitments involved in a covenant of love, such as the relationship between God and his people. Today, in modern times, we see more and more fear of commitment and, in the name of a misunderstood freedom, it is believed that everyone can decide everything for himself. But very soon we fall into the trap that precisely this false freedom sets for us, leaving us at the mercy of our arbitrary, unbridled desires and passions, so that, in the end, we are caught in the nets of modern idols.

In today's reading there are two passages which, in the light of the New Covenant, we would stress somewhat differently. We hear the prophet Zechariah cry out to the people: "*if you abandon Yahweh, he will abandon you*" - to make them understand what the consequences of their wrongdoing will be.

We can often notice that the Old Testament texts do not make that fine distinction between God's active will and His passive will, i.e. what He allows to happen. All events are practically presented as God's active will, so that one would have the impression that it is God Himself who causes the misfortunes. But certainly the Lord never actively wills evil for man; on the contrary, He allows it, so that at least in this way he may learn and, when he feels the painful consequences, recognise his evil ways.

If man does not want to listen, the option remains for him to learn through experience, even if it is sometimes a bitter lesson. In this context, we would not say, like the prophet Zechariah, that God has turned away from his people; rather, because of the sin of idolatry, the people have lost the clarity and the path that God had laid out for them, and so they could no longer accept the hand that God was holding out to them.

A second point in today's reading that distinguishes it from the times of the New Covenant is the moment when Zechariah, on the point of death, exclaims: "*Yahweh will see this and avenge it*". In this respect, the New Testament raises us to another height. Jesus himself, from the Cross, asks the Father to forgive his enemies (cf. Lk 23:34), and

St. Stephen, while he was being stoned, exclaims: "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*" (Acts 7:60).

May we all, in the light of the New Covenant and in the grace that God gives us in Christ, proclaim the Good News with such authority and credibility that people will turn away from modern idols and listen willingly to God!