

19. October 2023

The time of God's forbearance

Rom 3:21-30a

'God's saving justice was witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, but now it has been revealed altogether apart from law: God's saving justice given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. No distinction is made: all have sinned and lack God's glory, and all are justified by the free gift of his grace through being set free in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. So what becomes of our boasts? There is no room for them. On what principle- that only actions count? No; that faith is what counts, since, as we see it, a person is justified by faith and not by doing what the Law tells him to do. Do you think God is the God only of the Jews, and not of gentiles too? Most certainly of gentiles too.'

After having heard in the readings of the last two days strong words from the Apostle Paul on the seriousness of sin and the responsibility of all men before God, this time he speaks to us of the comfort that faith in Christ gives us. In His grace, God turns to all men to make them partakers of redemption through His Son. It is not our own efforts that can bring us salvation, but the action of God, who manifests Himself to mankind. Each person can come to Him and, through faith, receive all that the Lord wishes to grant to mankind.

Therefore, no one can boast of having merited salvation. It will always be an undeserved and free gift, but it is up to us to cooperate with grace and thus to gather merit.

It is extremely wise on God's part to act in this way towards us men, for how accurately God knows the depths of our hearts and knows how to read what is in them! There he will discover again and again the temptation to think ourselves great, abusing the marvellous gifts we have received in order to increase our own honour. That is why the Lord always gives us to understand that we are only the recipients of His benefits, and that we should praise Him for His goodness, instead of focusing on ourselves.

Could there be a greater gift from God than to offer us salvation? How willing He is to forgive even the worst sins that man commits, if only He is willing to convert!

In today's reading, St. Paul introduces a beautiful term: "The time of God's forbearance". Let us pause a little here... According to the context in which he mentions it, St. Paul refers to the fact that God has mercy on men who lived in ignorance and had turned away from God, their reasoning having become confused and their hearts darkened. He does not want to take their sins into account!

Here we are confronted with a constant attitude of the Lord, which in no way means that sin is trivialised. It is simply God's incomprehensible love for those creatures whom He has destined to be His children that moves Him to prolong the "time of His forbearance" ever longer. Up to the present day!

If we were to look at the situation from the perspective of pure justice and measure only to a certain extent the destruction brought about by the sins of mankind, it would be more than understandable that God would punish it. In a way, these sins even cry out for justice.

If God, in His Wisdom, allows men to be confronted with the darkness of His actions and to feel "in the flesh" the consequences of their evil deeds, He does so in order to lead them back to the light. God's deepest intention is always to save a person, and so He extends the "time of His forbearance" until the hour of his death, so that he can still receive forgiveness in his last breath. This gives us true confidence and hope!

The Lord does not want to simply abandon men to self-destruction; He tries everything to save them. And here again we see that "*no human being might feel boastful before God.*" (1 Cor 1:29). The salvation and redemption of mankind is due to God alone, and never to our own efforts. Those who internalise this truth will never tire of praising the patience and long-suffering of our God, and will use the "time of His forbearance" to seek with Him those who do not yet know the grace and love of the Lord.

However, we should not interpret the "time of God's forbearance" as if it will never come to an end, nor should we allow ourselves to be paralysed in doing everything in our power to welcome and proclaim salvation.