

13. November 2023

Sin and forgiveness

Lk 17:1-6

'He said to his disciples, 'Causes of falling are sure to come, but alas for the one through whom they occur! It would be better for such a person to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round the neck than to be the downfall of a single one of these little ones. Keep watch on yourselves! If your brother does something wrong, rebuke him and, if he is sorry, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, "I am sorry," you must forgive him.' The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith. The Lord replied, 'If you had faith like a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you. '

Here the question of the seriousness of sin and scandal is touched upon, as well as the question of the readiness to forgive. It is necessary to keep the balance between the two; for if the scales are tipped too far to one side or the other, things will get out of hand.

As far as sin is concerned, there is a tendency nowadays not to perceive it in its abysmal perversion. Sin is relativised, and faults seem to have less and less weight on the moral level, even in the Church. On the other hand, every sin, no matter how serious, can be forgiven, as long as the sinner repents and makes a sincere effort to change. For this to happen, however, he must first clearly recognise the seriousness of the sin.

Listening to today's Gospel, sexual abuse within the Church naturally comes to mind, which has become a painful topic. However, we cannot reduce this Gospel to this area alone... There are also abuses in the area of doctrine, when it is not transmitted according to the truth of the Gospel and the authentic Magisterium of the Church. These false doctrines can, for example, become a trap for candidates for the priesthood, in that they weaken their faith and, consequently, also that of many of the faithful, because priests have a privileged position in the proclamation. Any relaxation or laxity in the field of morality can therefore open the door to sin and hinder conversion.

Whatever it is and however serious it may be, the Lord is always ready to forgive, and so should we be. When the other person wants to change his life, we must forgive him even seven times a day; and that means, always! It is God's enormous generosity that must be reflected in our willingness to forgive. This is so important to the Lord that He makes it clear to us that whoever is not willing to forgive, his sins will not be forgiven either (cf. Mt

6:15). To forgive means to renounce the position of the accuser, to adopt instead the attitude of God, always ready to forgive the repentant sinner. One renounces to claim the debt that the other owes - or supposedly owes - to us.

It is precisely in forgiveness that God's love manifests itself in a special way. Who could say that he is not in need of forgiveness? It should be made clear that the effectiveness of the forgiveness that is received depends on the intention to make amends on the part of the guilty party. It would not be sufficient if the Church were to respond to all serious transgressions only with the aspect of punishment and expiation, without opening access to conversion, forgiveness and reconciliation. This is where the difference between Church and State must be shown! The latter has to deal, in the first instance, with justice; whereas the Church is "Mother and Teacher".

At the end of today's text, the Lord focuses our attention on faith. He leaves us with a very clear statement: *"If you had faith like a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you"*. Of course no one is asking us to test our faith by this particular example the Lord mentions! Rather, He wants us to see that, in faith, everything becomes possible. Even situations that seem to have no way out can be changed; situations that, from the human perspective, no longer have a case... Precisely these are a challenge to our faith; precisely these are the ones that want to make us see the Omnipotence of God; precisely these are the ones that invite us to leave behind the plane of our own experience and ideas, which is so limited, to adhere in faith to the Lord... Just like the disciples, we should ask that our faith be strengthened; even more, ask for a very great faith. This request will be pleasing to the Lord!