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Proclaiming the Gospel with wisdom

Acts 14:5-18

Eventually with the connivance of the authorities a move was made by gentiles as well as Jews to make attacks on them and to stone them. When they came to hear of this, they went off for safety to Lycaonia where, in the towns of Lystra and Derbe and in the surrounding country, they preached the good news. There was a man sitting there who had never walked in his life, because his feet were crippled from birth; he was listening to Paul preaching, and Paul looked at him intently and saw that he had the faith to be cured. Paul said in a loud voice, 'Get to your feet-stand up,' and the cripple jumped up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done they shouted in the language of Lycaonia, 'The gods have come down to us in human form.' They addressed Barnabas as Zeus, and since Paul was the principal speaker they called him Hermes. The priests of Zeus-outside-the-Gate, proposing that all the people should offer sacrifice with them, brought garlanded oxen to the gates. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard what was happening they tore their clothes, and rushed into the crowd, shouting, 'Friends, what do you think you are doing? We are only human beings, mortal like yourselves. We have come with good news to make you turn from these empty idols to the living God who made sky and earth and the sea and all that these hold. In the past he allowed all the nations to go their own way; but even then he did not leave you without evidence of himself in the good things he does for you: he sends you rain from heaven and seasons of fruitfulness; he fills you with food and your hearts with merriment.' With this speech they just managed to prevent the crowd from offering them sacrifice.

In the passage we are listening to today, the apostles meet people who cannot understand the miraculous healing of the invalid. They try to understand it with their human reason, and the only explanation they find is: "*The gods have come down to us in human form*". Then, according to their customs, they wanted to offer them a sacrifice. This was blasphemy to the apostles, and, following Jewish custom, they tore their clothes to express their indignation in a visible way. And then, in the midst of that situation, they proclaimed the Gospel. It is important for us to understand the way in which they make this proclamation.

The apostles realised that those people did not yet know much about God, and so they began their evangelisation from the very beginning, announcing God to them as their Creator. Also in his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul gives us to understand that, in reality,

it would be enough to see the works of Creation to recognise its Author:

"For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them, since God has made it plain to them: ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind's understanding of created things. And so these people have no excuse" (Rom 1:19-20).

As long as men continue to worship idols - whatever they may be - they have not yet understood that it was God, the Lord, who created them. They lack the true knowledge of God, or the image they have of Him is still undefined and marked by false ideas.

In the various forms of evangelisation, it is therefore important to first of all perceive what state the person is in with regard to his or her knowledge of God. This has to be taken into account especially when we are in a conversation for the purpose of evangelisation.

In one part of Mother Eugenia Ravasio's Message, God the Father addresses this situation: "Look at how many of my creatures who have become my children through the mystery of the Redemption are not in the meadow that I have established for all men through my Son! Look at how many others, and you know it, are unaware of the existence of these meadows, and how many creatures that have come from my hands do not even know the hand that created them! You do not know them, but I know them all".

When we find ourselves in an evangelistic situation - and, in a way, we could say that we are always in this situation - it is very important that we choose the appropriate theme of the message of salvation. Of course we must aim at the core of the proclamation, but there can be different ways to get there. There can be a kind of a "starter", an "antechamber", a preparation, an introduction, a process, a point of attachment, so to speak....

To increase the fruitfulness of the proclamation, a certain "astuteness" is needed, but enlightened by the Holy Spirit. For example, it would not make much sense to recommend complex mystical literature to beginners in the faith. We should also avoid the mistake of believing that a person is fit to take on great responsibility simply because we see a special gift in him or her, without having assessed his or her spiritual maturity.

But each person should bear witness to Christ according to the gifts he or she has received, even if he or she is just beginning the journey. He could tell what God has worked in him, what He has enabled him to recognise, etc... Through his change of life, he can give a wonderful testimony. But he should be aware that it is usually necessary to go a long and serious inner journey, until all aspects of our life become really consistent with that witness.

On the other hand, those who have been on the path for some time should allow themselves to be infected by the zeal of the new converts, rather than shying away from it. The fire of mission that burned in the apostles has not yet been extinguished. The Holy Spirit can and surely will rekindle it!

Can there be anything more important than being an authentic and trustworthy witness of God's love?

Let us learn from the Apostles and the Lord of the Apostles how we are to proclaim the gospel in our time, for even today there are pagans or neo-pagans who do not yet know the treasures of grace that God our Father has prepared for them.