

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people, ‘What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He went and said to the first, “My boy, you go and work in the vineyard today.” He answered, “I will not go”, but afterwards thought better of it and went. The man then went and said the same thing to the second who answered, “Certainly, sir”, but did not go. Which of the two did the father’s will?’ ‘The first’ they said. Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you, a pattern of true righteousness, but you did not believe him, and yet the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him.’

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

In the day’s passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus states to the chief priests and elders: “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you”. Jesus was energetically reproaching those who were considered masters of “how to think, judge, and live”. The prophet Zephaniah too (Zeph 3:1-2, 9-13), takes on the voice of God and says: ‘Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God’”. It is basically the same reprimand aimed at the chosen people, at the clerics of those times. Moreover, to say to a priest, to a chief priest, that a harlot is holier than he in the kingdom of Heaven is a very strong charge.

Jesus had the courage to speak the truth. However, considering certain reprimands, one has to wonder: “What should the Church be like? The people we read about in the Bible were indeed “men of the church”. They were “heads of the Church”. Jesus came, John the Baptist came, but those men “didn’t listen”. In the passage, the prophet recalls that although God chose his people, “this people became a rebellious city, an impure city. They did not accept how the Church should be, how the People of God should be”.

However, the prophet Zephaniah communicates God’s promise to the people: “I will forgive you”. That is in order for the People of God, the Church, all of us to be faithful, the first step is to feel we are forgiven.

After the promise of forgiveness, there is also the explanation of how the Church is supposed to be: ‘For I will live in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord’”. Thus, the faithful People of God must have these three traits: humble, lowly, with trust in the Lord”.

First of all the Church has to be “humble”. In other words a Church should “not show off her powers, her grandeur”. However, humility doesn’t mean a lethargic, weary person with a demure expression, because this is not humility, this is theatrics! This is feigned humility. True humility, instead, begins with the first step: ‘I am a sinner’. If I am not able to tell myself that I am a sinner and that others are better than me, you are not humble”. Thus, “the first step for a humble Church is feeling that she is a sinner” and the same is true for all of us. On the other hand, if any of us has the habit of looking at others’ defects and gossiping, this is not humility. It is instead thinking that you are the judge of others. The prophet says: “I will live in the midst of you a humble people”. This is a grace, and we must ask for this grace, that the Church may be humble, that I may be humble, that each one of us may be humble.

The People of God is also poor. Poverty is the first of the Beatitudes, but what does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? It means being attached only to God’s treasures. It definitely does not mean a Church that exists attached to money, that thinks about money, that thinks about how to earn money. For example there was someone who “innocently” said to the people that in order to pass through the Holy Door “you have to make an offering”. This is not the Church of Jesus, this is the Church of those chief priests, attached to money.

We might recall the story of Deacon Lawrence — the “treasurer of the diocese”, — who, when the emperor asked him to “bring the riches of the diocese” to turn them over in order to avoid being killed, St Lawrence returned “with the poor”. Thus, the poor are actually “the treasure of the Church”. You can even be the head of a bank, as long as your heart is poor, not attached to money and you place yourself at the service of others. Poverty, the Pope added, is characterized by this detachment which leads us to serve the needy. Am I or am I not poor?.

Lastly, the third trait: the People of God “shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord”. This too brings up a very direct question: Where do I place my trust? In power, in friends, in money? In the Lord!.

Thus it is this “legacy that the Lord promises us: ‘I will live in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord’. Humble because they feel they are sinners; poor because their heart is attached to God’s treasures, and if they have them it is only to administer them; seeking refuge in the Lord because they know that the Lord alone can guarantee what is good for them”. This is why Jesus had to tell the chief priests, “who did not understand these things”, that “a harlot would enter the kingdom of God before them”.

Let us ask the Lord that he give us a humble heart, a heart that is poor and above all that seeks refuge in the Lord, because the Lord never disappoints.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- To whom do you listen and follow?
- What do you think it was that prevented the Chief Priests and Elders from recognising and responding to the goodness and message of John & Jesus?
- Pope Francis suggests that the faithful People of God must have these three traits: humble, lowly, with trust in the Lord”. What does that mean for you?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.