

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus, a man of His time and space, shows us our true and full humanity

Lectio n° 4 A lukewarm love

How many times we would have said strong and effective words, but in fact we have been unable to! Haste makes us lose control of our speech. On the contrary, the humanity that Jesus shows us in the following passage is able to use the strength of the speech to lead His listeners to a choice. The strong and dramatic reproach turns then into a serious warning, decisive in our fundamental relation with Him. What He denounces is the utter incompatibility for the meeting, for the recognition, but He still leaves a door open for our choice.

The following passage from St Matthew's Gospel deals with Jesus' anger and His urge to make us pay attention to what is a stumbling block on our path as children of God.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit,
and set my heart on fire
with Your love.

Come, Holy Spirit,
enlighten my mind
so that I may understand Your Word.

Come, Holy Spirit,
and guide my actions
so that they may be docile to Your will.

Come, Holy Spirit,
and make me able to welcome Your gifts,
so that I may cooperate with Your divine action.

1. Lectio (to read the Word / to listen to it)

Matthew 7:21-23

21 'It is not anyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in Heaven. 22 When the day comes many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, work many miracles in Your name?" 23 Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, all evil doers!

Let us approach the text...

This is the ending of the first of Jesus' speeches, out of the five that we find in St Matthew's Gospel. It is the Sermon on the Mount, 5:1-7:29. The Sermon is opened by the proclamation of the Beatitudes, then goes on with Jesus' interpretation of the Law and the Prophets. The core of all that is the 'Our Father', around which stands Jesus' revelation of how we can become 'children', and be similar to the Father.

The passage we are examining comes immediately after an explanation on how to distinguish between true and fake prophets (7:15) – an issue that will come back in 24:11 – and is closely linked to the following lines, where those who build their house on the rock are opposed to those who build their house on sand.

Immediately after comes the phrase that in St Matthew's Gospel closed each and every of Jesus' speeches: "Jesus had now finished what He wanted to say..."

Let us divide the text into its parts:

7:21 Words

7:22 Facts

7:23 Unknown

Words

21 'It is not anyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in Heaven.

After giving a criterion helpful to discern between true and fake prophets, Jesus reveals another one, defining 'communion with the Father'. These are harsh words on Jesus' part, but He is unequivocal as usual: while destroying all illusions of a false relationship based on words, He gives us the way to reach the Father.

There are words which are not efficacious, our own... But here Jesus declares that even the repeated invocation of His very name ('Lord, Lord!') is not enough to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, to establish a relationship with the Father, to dwell in His house. Here St Matthew was probably referring to charismatic people who worked miracles within the community, and taking part in its worship ('Lord! 'Kyrie' used to be an acclamation voiced by the congregation) but without putting it into practice.

Of course to invoke the Lord is not enough and we cannot become ‘children’ without making the will of His Father who is in Heaven. The face of the Father comes to the fore in all of the Sermon on the Mount: He is its focus, as well as He is the focus of this present line.

In Mt 5:16, Jesus had already presented the “good works” done by those who listen to Him; their goal is that those who see them, “may give praise to your Father in Heaven”. In Mt 5:44-45, Jesus states that unconditional love (“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”) is the condition sine-qua-non to become children of the Father. Finally, in Mt 5:48, Jesus states that love for one’s enemies makes one perfect “just as your Heavenly Father is perfect”.

Now, at the end of the speech, Jesus forcefully states that in order to be in communion with the Father, in order to dwell with the Father in Heaven, His will must be done.

What does ‘to do His will’ exactly mean? The term used in the Greek text is ‘poieo’, that may also mean ‘to create’. Then we can say that we must give a shape to the Father’s will that is to be revealed, that will we begged “to be done” or, better, “to happen” (‘ghenetéto’) in the Our Father (Mt 6:10), expressed with an ‘aoristo tense’ highlighting that His will is an event happening in that precise moment.

It is astonishing to realize that we can dwell with the Father “in Heaven” whenever we make His will happen down here on earth, in a precise moment and in a precise and original way. The Our Father’s request is in our hands, we can grant or deny it, and His will will happen “in Heaven as it is on earth”.

This is of the utmost importance... Jesus is talking seriously, and we should be moved by His words. However, they are not just words... We cannot say “Lord, Lord!” if then the benevolent Father (“He causes His sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike”, 5:45) is not manifested by those who listen to His word.

Facts

22 When the day comes many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, work many miracles in Your name?”

How can we do the Father’s will? It will not be enough to have prophesied in His name, driven out demons, worked many miracles, “when the day comes”, the day when we will meet Jesus for good. That day will be a precise day, but “nobody knows it, neither the angels of Heaven, nor the Son, no one but the Father alone” (Mt 24:36). That day will be a day of meeting, in order to discern a likeness, a growth bringing down Heaven on earth, the will of the Father down on earth.

To prophesy? To drive out demons? To work many miracles? All that was done ‘with’ the name of Jesus (‘with’ is the more correct translation).

The phrase seems to suggest a usage of the name of Jesus, used to do things while remaining the protagonists. It is true that one can work through His name – and in fact many are those who operate like that. Jesus lets them do that... But in fact

neither He is being made present, nor are the meaning of His gestures and words. And the Father's love for His creation cannot come to the fore either.

On the contrary, to operate 'in' the name of Jesus would have been quite different: it would mean to take on the face of the Son, the face of the children of God, and to give a shape to the will of the Father, as it was made flesh by Jesus.

We could do many spectacular things, but they would not make us recognized by Jesus at the 'meeting'. So, what could make us take on the face of the children of God? What should we do, and how should we work, in order for it to give a shape to the will of the Father?

Unknown

23 Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, all evil doers!

After the warning, Jesus gives His verdict. St Matthew makes use of the verb 'omologhéo', which means 'to declare openly': this is a revelation on Jesus' part. To work wonders by making use of His name is not helpful for being recognized: "I have never known you!" A similar statement can be found in Mt 25:12, in the parable of the ten virgins. There the bridegroom says to the foolish virgins: "I do not know you".

Here there is something missing too and Jesus, similarly to Mt 25:41 (when all peoples have to face the Son of Man), sends away those who boast of miracles, defining them 'evil-doers', those who perform 'anomia'. The parallel passage from St Luke does not make use of the term 'anomia', rendered with 'evil', but the term 'adikias', 'injustice'.

Let us investigate then what St Matthew's 'anomia' means: 'a-nomos', that is, with no Law, refers to an ethical-religious disorder. This term occurs also in Mt 13:41; 23:28; 24:12. In addition to those passages, it can be found in Ps 36:4, dealing with the perversity of sinners.

Mt 13:41 refers to the parable of the Darnel: all who do evil will be thrown into the blazing furnace, together with "all causes of falling" (ie, all those who are stumbling blocks in the community). In Mt 23:28 there is a reference to all those who look upright from the outside, but inside are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, 'dikaioi'. In 24:12 Jesus specifies that "with the increase of lawlessness, love in most people will grow cold".

We can then gather that what is indeed missing is love, "love will grow cold". The real difference is, then, between giving a shape to the Father's love, like Jesus did, and working deeds that are 'anomia', 'love that has grown cold', lukewarm love, disorder as far as God's Law is concerned, the Law pointing to God's way. We can pretend to be upright, but in the end we are stumbling blocks, counter-witness to the face of the Father within the community. "Love in most people will grow cold"... and it will be impossible to mirror Jesus' face, to be known by Him who is pure Love turned into humanity.

In the passage ending the Sermon on the Mount, that comes immediately after the passage we are dealing with here, there is a precious suggestion on how we can give a shape to the Father's love: Jesus' words must be listened to, not just heard, in order to put them into practice creatively in the circumstances of life, because they are the will of the Father revealed by Jesus.

The whole Sermon on the Mount, focussed on the revelation of the Father, leads us from the Beatitudes to God making Himself present first by giving Himself through the Law, then more clearly through the humanity of Jesus. He is a God who causes His sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and who entrusts His face to the man-Jesus, as well as to each man and woman, so that they may give it a concrete shape by loving their enemies (Mt 5:45). Each and every word uttered on the Mount reveals the Father: it is a rock, and those who are listening to it are aware that in the Psalms the Rock is God Himself. Thus Jesus' words become the unique foundations on which the shape of the will of the Father will be built, as it was revealed in the humanity of Jesus and in the beauty of each and every creature.

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

- A reproach to shake us in our lukewarmness and to make us stop boasting of our successes.
- The warning that we will be sent away if we are not similar to Him.
- The urge to be creative, that is, being able to see how to give shape to love in our present lives.

In this passage another nuance of Jesus' humanity comes to the fore. Once again, we are questioned on how we express our humanity in our own time and space.

If the Father's love in Jesus shows itself as a reproach, shaking us in our beliefs, how can we remind one another to get rid of lukewarmness?

God is preceding us, therefore what we have to do is to live to the full, responding to the silent invitation of the Presence that wants to emerge in us and around us...

I show you a point of view:

Once again You, whose loving wisdom is moulding me in the very womb of all the forces and of all the cases of earthly life, make me able to try a gesture...

May I, after desiring Your active Presence, utter the fiery act of faith on all things that will make Your Presence pour down on them. Thanks to You, this wait and this faith have become full of 'working virtue'.

But how will I be able to give witness to You, and to prove to myself, with a visible effort, that I do not belong to those who say, 'Lord, Lord' and that's it?

I shall cooperate with Your benevolent action, and I shall do it in two ways. First of all, to Your deep inspiration ordering me to be, I shall correspond by my commitment not to suffocate, pervert, dilapidate my skill to love and to act. Second, I shall tie myself to Your Providence that surrounds me and moment after moment, through the events of the day, shows me the steps I have to tread. I shall tie myself because I care not to lose any opportunities to ascend "towards the spirit".

The life of each of us is the result of these two threads: the thread of inner growth, according to which ideas, affections, human and mystical attitudes are built in us; and the thread of outward success, according to which we find ourselves in the precise place, moment by moment, where all the energies of the Universe will converge, in order to produce in us the effect expected by God.

(from 'The Divine Environment' by Teilhard de Chardin)

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

Lord my God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I cannot see the path that lies in front of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will lead to.
And similarly, I do not know myself truly,
and the fact that I'm thinking that I'm following Your will
does not really mean that I'm really doing it.

However, I believe that the desire to please You does really please You.
And I hope that that desire may inform each and every of my actions.
I hope that I may do nothing without that desire.
And I know that, if I act so, You will guide me on the right path,
even if I may know very little.

This is why I will put my trust in You for ever,
even though I may feel I have lost my way,
and that I live in the shadow of death.
I will not fear anything, because You are with me for ever,
and You will not leave me alone when I have to face dangers.
(Thomas Merton)

4. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let us give all our actions (present, past and future ones) to God who always precedes us, wishing to remain in His love.

5. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

Let us share THE word we are called to give shape to more clearly in our life, so that love may be rekindled.