

OCTOBER 16, 2019 Wednesday of the 28th Week of Ordinary Time

Optional Memorial of St. Hedwig Optional Memorial of St. Margaret Mary
Alacoque

Rom 2:1-11

Ps 62:2-3,6-7,9

Lk 11:42-46

In the first reading, Paul, addressing the believers of Rome, insists that the Jews, like the pagans, commit evil. Indeed, he points to how easily the Jews accuse the pagans of immorality, basking in the conviction of being better than others because of their total observance of the Law. To show his fellow Jews how they have lost their way, the Apostle tries to demolish some of their false certainties, which he himself had shared before he came to know the Risen Lord. After previously trusting in the flesh and in his membership in the people who had received the Law, Paul was converted to Christ through faith, which justifies and works through love, not through the ritual observance of precepts. It is not enough to believe with the mouth, with the exterior practice of the Law; one must live in faith. We will be judged, in fact, on love, the fruit of our adhesion in faith to Christ, who died and rose again. Faith is participation in the divine nature and in the divine love of Jesus.

Paul denounces the sin of hardness of heart and of the obstinacy of a people who believe they are the only ones to deserve salvation. The time of privileges is over; the time has come for each person to make a decision about who Christ is. It is a time when each person must surrender to the mercy of God, discovering that he wants to pour out his goodness even upon those who have been far from him. God is the only judge of people; we are all subject to his judgment, without exception. The certainty of being right and the arrogance of thinking oneself to be the sole defender of truth and morality (the Law) can lead to contempt for God, considering his mercy as weakness, and to the false exclusion of others from salvation.

Today's Gospel passage, a prophetic denunciation of the Pharisees and the scholars of the law, is a warning to Christian communities of yesterday and today of the temptations of legalism, formalism, and ritualism, which nourish that great enemy of the saving work of Christ, a prideful and impenetrable self-referentiality. The perversion of the Law into an external formalism and the

reduction of the call of the chosen people to an exclusivist privilege that the pagans can never have undermine the universality of salvation and the mission of the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus begins by denouncing the abuses of the Pharisees regarding offerings. They are capable of observing minimal and marginal norms, such as the tithe on mint, rue, and herbs. Jesus does not want to eliminate these practices (the annual offering of tithing at the temple was called for by Deut 14:22), but to place them in the right context within a true relationship of faith in God and love of neighbour. Making an offering without a personal involvement in a journey of conversion can become the excuse to neglect fundamental precepts, such as justice and the love of God, realities that demand a decisive and continuous transformation of one's heart and the world.

Jesus' other accusation regards the tendency to seek honours, to pursue gratifications, and to take care of appearances of power, taking seats of honour. The insistent concern over appearance is the result of an inner corruption that makes a person like a sepulchre, perhaps sumptuous outside, but full of rot inside. While the interior remains invisible to the eyes of others, the exterior is carefully tended for selfish ends.

The words of Jesus resound with force and they anger not only the Pharisees but also the scholars of the Law, who are deeply offended by him. Jesus continues then by offering a harsh rebuke for them as well, against their practice of imposing on others the heavy burden of observances in which they are not personally involved, revealing the profound inconsistency between their teaching and their own lives. The law is given to serve life, to preserve it and promote it. Faith never dehumanizes a person; on the contrary, it encourages every person toward his or her fullest growth.

We find here a truly apostolic point of view: faced with the universality of God's salvation and the mission of Jesus and his disciples, the Pharisees and scholars of the Law must reconsider their way of thinking about a relationship with God and salvation. The occasion for Jesus' critical reaction is his taking a seat at the table without having carried out the traditional ablutions before a meal.

The first severe criticism of the scene (Lk 11:39-44), just prior to where our reading begins, is directed toward the Pharisees' offering a false conception of life and of the relationship with God. The Pharisee is amazed (Lk 11:38) by Jesus' behaviour, and he receives an immediate and hard answer from Jesus (Lk 11:39).

The importance that Luke attributes to the discussion, the tone of Jesus' criticism, his reference to the prophets and to the apostles in the context of the wisdom of God (Lk 11:49) all demonstrate his seriousness. What is at stake in the problematic attitude of Jesus' interlocutors is the restriction of salvation to the outward observance of the Law, which endangers the universal mission founded on the saving will of the God of the Covenant.

The question arises first of all on the level of distinguishing between pure and impure, in terms of internal and external, of rules imposed on others and not practiced by those who impose them. This recalls Peter's vision before his meeting with the centurion Cornelius, who insisted puritanically that "nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth" (Acts 11:8). In the gospel passage from Luke, Jesus' response is clear: God has made the inside and the outside, everything is the work of his hands, so that everything is pure (see Acts 10:15, Mk 7:15). No one can be declared profane or impure, Peter understood (see Acts 10:28). The apostolate and mission are the manifestation of the goodness of the Father, God the creator of all, who ignores all barriers of ritual or formal separation. The missionary is called to be close to all people (see Acts 10:46-47), because God has no favourites (see Acts 10:34).

Luke uses a formula full of meaning to express the universal openness of salvation offered by God in Jesus and the mission of his Church: "You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside? But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you" (Lk 11:40-41). To be pure, practice mercy and live charity. In the kingdom of God, what determines relationships between people, overcoming barriers of discrimination and separation, is the mystery of the goodness of God who, in Jesus, unites himself to every person and offers mercy to all. Missionary disciples of Jesus are called to give what they possess within. Not only to give material goods in alms, but to offer themselves first of all: their own lives and their own hearts. No simple external acts are required, nor the execution of ritual precepts; the missionary disciple is asked to give all of himself or herself to Jesus, offering soul and body, inside and outside, heart and emotions, relationships and norms, for the cause of the salvation of all in the mission.