

OCTOBER 22, 2019 Tuesday of the 29th Week of Ordinary Time

Optional Memorial of St. John Paul II

Rom 5:12,15b,17-19,20b-21

Ps 40:7-10,17

Lk 12:35-38

The passage from Paul offered in today's liturgy is at the very heart of his Letter to the Romans. Behind the statement that the human person needs to be redeemed, there is the conviction that guilt taints our relationship with God. After having demonstrated, with the help of experience and the Scriptures, that the redemption of humanity comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ and not from circumcision, the Apostle begins to deal with "our" Christian experience.

If someone damages a friendship, hurting their friend, a disorder is created in his own heart, which will be overcome only when the friend welcomes him and embraces him again, accepting his apology. Redemption, says Paul, is the reason and condition of our living in peace with God. But for friends to return to friendship, it can be necessary for someone to mediate between the two, telling the guilty one that the other no longer bears a grudge and waiting with an open heart. And when everything is over, the bond will be stronger, and the joy will be greater than before. Now, Paul continues, knowing that the mediator, Jesus, had to undergo many humiliations and sufferings to find and convince me to trust in the goodness of the Father, for whose love I had contempt, my heart is deeply grateful and ready to collaborate joyfully with him in the work of reconciliation, participating in his sacrifices to bring the message to others.

How can we doubt this love, asks the Apostle to the nations, after the extraordinary demonstration that God has given us? The historical event of Jesus' death has a theological meaning of substitutionary suffering: he died for us, in our place and the place of all, for us who had turned away from God. In other words, he who received the mission of mediation is revealed to be our great friend, taking upon himself the weight of all the evils of which we were guilty when we were alone and lost. This incomparable demonstration of divine love for us will shine in history forever, illuminating the path of peoples.

Paul goes far and wide through the world, without rest and with great joy, giving his very self to spread this good news. Jesus did not sacrifice himself because we

were Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, educated or ignorant, rich or poor, men or women, but simply because we were sinners in need of forgiveness. And his gift was dispensed without our having any merit. What most pleases God is not to inflict punishment, but to give without measure his sublime mercy.

After God has accomplished this ineffable mystery of love, absolutely gratuitous and universal, it is impossible, adds the Apostle, that God will not complete the work of our salvation! The fullness of salvation, therefore, concerns future goods, eschatological goods: glory and eternal life. In this way, the peace and reconciliation that we receive “now,” and which our hearts savour, point toward a future fulfilment, since they are the pledge of the gifts we will receive later.

To demonstrate the triple nature of this liberation – that is, from sin, from the Law, and from death – Paul describes the situation of the human being before and after Christ, showing the consequences of the disobedience of Adam – a “figure” of the one who was to come – and those of the obedience of Christ, the new Adam. Reflecting on the story of the fall of humanity (Adam) offered by Genesis, Paul uses the theological truth it presents, that the cause of humanity’s tragic condition of slavery is sin. The etiological character of the Genesis account points to sin as the cause of the general misery of humanity (pain, affliction, discord, violence, and death). Adam’s disobedience – both individually and collectively (see Gen 1:27) – has introduced an active and disastrous force into the world.

But Jesus Christ is the liberator. Through him came redemption and eternal life for all. Jesus is the “second” Adam, antithetical to the first. The first human being had no faith in his Creator; he disobeyed and broke his friendship with him. But Jesus is the new Adam, absolutely faithful and perfectly obedient, who gives his life to restore our friendship with God. The antithesis underlines the immeasurable superiority of the benefit brought by Jesus as opposed to the damage inflicted by Adam. “For if, by the transgression of the one, death came to reign through that one, how much more will all who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:15). The contrast between “one” and “all” highlights the universal scope of the new bond of friendship brought by the Lord Jesus.

The central theme of the Gospel reading is the second coming of the Lord in glory, to judge the living and the dead, as we profess in the Creed: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” The period that separates believers from this inevitable appointment is a time of active expectation. The

most important idea of the Gospel passage is the absence of the master who, after having entrusted a patrimony to be cultivated and put to good use, steps away, without abandoning his own to whatever may come. In suggesting this as God's way of working, Jesus also includes the mystery of the freedom given to humanity; we can choose how to manage the gift of life without physical pressure, without feeling a manipulative presence.

In the Sacred Scriptures the request to "gird your loins" is found for the first time in Exodus 12:11. The context is the preparation for the Passover meal before the coming of the angel of death and the escape from the land of slavery. Following this, the phrase became a common formula to indicate a call to service, exemplified by Jesus: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father... [H]e rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet" (Jn 13:1,4-5). In this gesture, service in the name of God has been elevated to the rank of the sacrament of love, within the Eucharist which allows the recipient to participate in the life of Jesus (see Jn 6:30-58). It is not by chance that the fourth Gospel makes the Last Supper the context for the washing of the feet. To Peter who tries to shield himself from that encounter, "unworthy" of the Master, Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me" (Jn 13:8). Washing the feet of others is a gesture that the Master entrusts to his disciples as an emblem of the lifestyle to be brought to all nations. After the resurrection of Jesus, in fact, the disciples are dissuaded from continuing to look to heaven; rather, they are encouraged to go on mission to fulfil all that Jesus had said and did, with the promise that the Master would return to his own in the same way he had left (see Acts 1:11). We wait in hope for the return of the Master, with our loins girded, that is, serving our neighbours in the faith, proclaiming and helping them to participate in the salvation offered to us as a pledge in the Eucharist.

The metaphor of the lamps to be kept burning (as in Ex 27:20 and Lev 24:2) qualifies the waiting as a time of careful attentiveness. The apparent absence of the master can lead to the temptation to replace him, pretending to become the absolute arbiters of life – one's own and that of others – and by doing away with the assets entrusted to one's care. From God's perspective, waiting responds to the law of love. For us who live, the long period of waiting only increases our desire to meet God face to face. We must be strong to bear the burden of holding to a promise with no deadline. It is important to be aware that

all the seasons of a life well lived, seeking and doing God's will, are a kairos, a time favourable to being called home. Our being ready for this moment will make our lives successes.