

Reflection

March 2, 2020

In Italy, they use the term “tempi forti” to refer to seasons like Lent. They are, literally, strong times ... spiritually intense times. The liturgical readings do not continue to follow the Gospel begun in Ordinary Time, following chapter after chapter of Mark. In Lent, we hear texts particularly chosen for this season of spiritual intensity.

Certainly, our Gospel text today from Matthew 25 suggests that intensity ... a scenario of the last judgment. We hear the final separation of the sheep and goats, based on actions we have come to call the works of mercy. I have often found this Gospel disconcerting, but it also reminds me of a story of someone disturbed by it for a different reason.

When I was visiting a community, there was a priest there from, I think, the Philippines. He grew up in a country place. As a child, he had never seen a sheep. He was accustomed to the goats that roamed around, playing with the children, and wandering in and out of their homes. When he listened to Matthew 25, he was disturbed and asked, “what’s wrong with my little goats?”

Well, of course, there’s nothing wrong with the goats; it’s us. I read this text and ask myself, when did I ever feed the hungry, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned? Not much answer. As I was reflecting on this, lines from another text about God’s concerns came to mind. They are from Isaiah 58, which was surely known to Jesus. Actually, we heard the text last Friday.

The prophet is expressing true justice and objecting to his listeners who claimed to observe the traditional fasts but who were unjust and mistreated their workers. Isaiah, speaking for God, says:

This rather is the fasting that I wish;
Releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke.
Sharing your bread with the hungry,
Sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
And not turning your back on your own.

.....

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. ... (Is. 58:6-8)

This chapter from Isaiah expresses in beautiful and hope-filled terms what God expects of the people and the reward they will receive: light, divine guidance and renewed strength.

Whether we call these actions true justice, works of mercy or acts of charity, it is today’s Gospel that offers the newness of Jesus’ way. The radical “why” of these actions. Jesus’

listeners ask, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty; when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?"

We know the answer Jesus gives. "Amen I say to you, what you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me."

The people knew the divine mandate to act justly and with charity toward others. Now they learned that they were serving Jesus in the hungry and thirsty, the sick ... and in every person encountered.

We have been taught this all along the way, but how can we comprehend seeing Christ in every person? Obviously, this is not about sheep and goats. It is not even just about heaven or hell. It is about love for Christ and really believing that he considers any good done to others as done for him.

In the end, I ask myself,

How do I hope to grow in that spirit during this tempo forte ... this intense time of Lent?

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