

## THE GOD OF CARROTS AND STICKS

In some parts of the world, especially the UK and Ireland, today is Mothering Sunday, which in its origin celebrated our mother Churches, that is Churches where we received our baptism. The celebration has come to include also mothers in general. Therefore, happy mothering Sunday to everyone and remember to pray for the Church where you received your baptism, your mother Church which first announced to you the good news of salvation!

Today is also designated as Laetare Sunday, meaning “Rejoice Sunday”. We celebrate the joy of the free gift God’s great love and rich mercy, revealed in the message of restoration in the 1st Reading and in the message of redemption in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading and in the Gospel.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Reading comes from the very last passage of the Hebrew Bible (2 Chronicles 36:14-23). The Book of Chronicles reflects a complex theological-historical composition beginning from creation with Adam and concluding with the end of the Babylonian exile. It has a lot of affinity with the Books of Samuel and Kings, Ezra and Nehemiah, and appears to revise some of their material, omitting some, and repurposing others, bringing to them new perspectives and meanings.

In the passage of today’s 1<sup>st</sup> Reading, God is presented as being provoked to anger by his own people. Unlike the Books of Kings where the sins occasioning the exile are mostly blamed on Manasseh, here, it is on Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before the Babylonian exile, as well as on all the officers of the priests and the people: they are said to have done things that were displeasing to the Lord (36:11-12), following the abominable practices of other nations and polluting the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (36:14).

The Lord’s first reaction could be described as “the carrot approach”; he was reluctant to punish, so he felt pity for the people and his temple and therefore sent messengers to call the people to repentance, but they would not listen. Rather, they mocked the messengers of God, they disdained the words of the Lord and taunted his prophets. This situation necessitated recourse to the “stick approach”: the Lord exposed them to the ferocity of the brutal Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar who descended upon them killing young and old, and looting both temple and palace treasuries, as well as burning down what was left in the city. The remnant of the people he took into exile in Babylon as servants, just as Jeremiah had forewarned (36:15-21).

The experience of these exiles is the subject of the Responsorial Psalm: “By the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept; there our captors asked us: sing to us one of Sion’s songs; O how could we sing the Lord’s song on foreign soil? (Psalm 137:1-6). The same Lord who had raised the King of Babylon to punish his people also raised the King of Persia, Cyrus, who would grant permission for the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem and the return of the Judeans to their land (36:22-23).

In this passage, therefore, we see a movement from divine mercy to divine punishment and back to divine mercy, demonstrating that while God’s first and last word concerning us is mercy, in-between, when men fail to respond to his mercy, he can also employ the instrument of punishment to bring us back to our rightful place.

While it is often tempting to imagine God in a linear way, as either punishing or forgiving, the God of the Bible, the readings of today help us to contemplate, is a God of paradoxes: he punishes, yet he also forgives, he possesses the stick but also the carrot. The good news is, as Psalm 30:5 puts it, "His anger is only for a moment but his favour is forever..." (cf. Psalm 136).

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading (Ephesians 2:4-10), Saint Paul emphasizes the rich mercy of God and the greatness of his love by which we are saved by grace. Our faith is not meritorious work for our salvation but acceptance of the mercy which God offers us and our positive response to the love which he shows us. In this way, our good works become not the source of our salvation but the expression that we have embraced God's love and his merciful offer of salvation.

God's quality of mercy is celebrated also in the Old Testament in his characterization as "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and faithfulness...forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin..." Yet, God is also described as holding us to account: "Not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7; Num 14:18).

In the Gospel (John 3:14-21), the riches of God's mercy and the greatness of his love are underscored in the gift of his only Son for our salvation. Like the children of Israel bitten by the serpents causing death (Numbers 21:4-9), we are bitten by the serpents of sin which place us in a condition of condemnation and death. But thankfully, like Moses raised up the serpent restoring life to all who looked upon it, God has raised up for us Jesus Christ that all who look upon him in faith may not perish but be saved (John 3:14-16).

The Gospel also clearly identifies salvation and not condemnation as the mission of Jesus in the world: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:17). The Church, which is the body of Christ, must see her essential duty not in proclaiming the condemnation of the world but the salvation of the world. Condemnation is received not in proclamation but as a consequence of not accepting the salvation brought and proclaimed.

In the riches of your mercy and the greatness of your love, grant us Lord your saving grace, give unfailing light to those who walk in the darkness of death; rescue us from the poisonous snakes of our sins as we look up to Jesus your only Son whom you raised up on the wood of the cross for our salvation. Amen!

Happy Sunday!