**EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)**

Saint Gregory of Narek, Abbot and Doctor of the Church; St Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows, Religious

Sir 27:4-7; Ps 92; 1Cor 15:54-58; Lk 6:39-45

*Lord, it is good to give thanks to you*

**COMMENTARY**

*The Wisdom of Heart*

Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel follows that of last Sunday, and we are always within his “Discourse on the Plain”. What we have said about the wisdom and non-legalistic nature of Jesus’ message now comes to light even more. Like Sirach, the wise of the Jewish tradition, which we heard in the first reading, the master Jesus also leaves his disciples various instructions/sentences based on daily observations, to guide them on the path of wisdom with God.

These picturesque concrete wisdom instructions in the Biblical-Jewish tradition are called *meshalim*, a term translated into Greek more usually as “parables” (*parabolē*).This is precisely the word with which the Evangelist Luke introduces the teaching of Jesus we heard today. Thus, the listeners-disciples are invited to a constant reflection on the highlighted truths for a wise application in everyday life. These are the universal principles which, if we reflect more deeply, also prove to be useful in a missionary perspective, that is, for Christian wisdom in the mission of proclaiming Christ.

1. *The Importance of the Teacher*

The image of the blind man who wants to lead another blind man is beautiful and at the same time immediate. No further explanation is needed to convince the listener of the importance of having a non-blind guide in life. A question arises spontaneously: who now is the teacher to whom I entrust myself on the journey of life? Who am I following now? This question is more than appropriate in the context of Jesus’ previous teaching on the seemingly impossible love for enemies and on mercy. Will I follow Jesus, the divine master, or an earthly teacher who offers perhaps the “easier,” more “approachable” things to “recruit” more followers?

In this context of following the divine master, we understand the observation on the relationship between the disciple and the teacher: “No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.” Furthermore, the principle reflects that of the Jewish tradition on the relationship between the one who sends somebody to convey a message and the sent one. So much so that the same expression of Jesus, but in a longer form, occurs among the recommendations to his disciples when he sent them on a mission in the midst of persecutions, in the so-called Missionary Discourse in the Gospel of Matthew: “No disciple is above his teacher, no slave above his master” (Mt 10:24). Thus, it is also found in Jn 15:20, still in the context of the persecution the disciples face in the world: “No slave is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.” In light of all this, Jesus’ teaching on the “insuperability” of the master does not intend to set limits on the cognitive-intellectual learning process (here surely a disciple will be able to surpass the teacher). It concerns the existential situation of the “*sequela*” (to follow Jesus) and mission of the disciple who is thus called to measure himself always with the example and words of the Master who sends him.

2. *The Splinter and the Wooden Beam*

Here we have another “parable” with the same immediacy. Indeed, the proposed image is even more effective with the exaggerated (hyperbolic) image of the wooden beam in the eye. The message for those who are always ready to “correct” others or, worse still, to gossip about the other’s faults / shortcomings, is immediately grasped. It is a kind of illustrative commentary on the recommendation not to judge and not to condemn, previously delivered in the Discourse on the Plain and taken up later by St. James in his letter to the first Christians with even sharper words (Jas 4:11-12: “Do not speak evil of one another, brothers. Whoever speaks evil of a brother or judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law. If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save or to destroy. Who then are you to judge your neighbor?”).

Back to Jesus’ words, beyond its ethical dimension, the teaching proves to be fundamental for every community of disciples in giving witness to their Master. Not without reason here it insists on the figure of the “brother” (the word recurs four times in two verses), to emphasize the “fraternal” relationship between the disciples of the same teacher. Here comes to mind spontaneously the touching recommendation Jesus left to his intimate disciples before the Passion: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn 13:34-35). Yes, “[love for one another] this is how all will know that you are my disciples,” and nothing else.

3. *From the Fullness of the Heart the Mouth Speaks*

Sirach says, “The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had; / so too does one’s speech disclose the bent of one’s mind” (First Reading). In the same vein, Jesus the Sage teaches his disciples the wisdom of discernment between the good and the bad tree: “For every tree is known by its own fruit.” It is the same for the man whose heart is recognized by the words that come out of his mouth. A similar saying in the Vietnamese folk tradition should be noted: “*Chim khôn thử tiếng, người ngoan thử lời*” (The wise bird is tested by its voice; the just man is tested by his word). Surely, similar proverbs can be found in the traditions of many other peoples. It is a universal truth, fruit of human intelligence illuminated by the Spirit of God in the human heart. However, in his teaching, Jesus applies this truth not to reaffirm a fatal predestination of the evil who will always remain the same (and therefore condemned), but in the perspective of a wise discernment. It is an invitation to a self-verification of a disciple’s life: “You, who follow the Lord and his teaching, what are your fruits?”

In this perspective, the final proverbial observation “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” or “out of the heart’s abundance the mouth speaks” applies equally well to bearing witness to Jesus. The difficulty of speaking about Jesus can come from a heart “occupied” with many other things than Jesus and his Gospel. In this regard, it is worth listening to the observation of Saint Teresa of Avila: “Let us consider the glorious Saint Paul, from whose lips the name of Jesus seems never to have been absent, because He was firmly enshrined in his heart.” And continues: “Since realizing this, I have looked carefully at the lives of a number of saints who were great contemplatives and I find that they followed exactly the same road. Saint Francis, with his stigmata, illustrates this, as does Saint Anthony of Padua with the Divine Infant. Saint Bernard, too, delighted in Christ’s Humanity, and so did Saint Catherine of Siena and many others.” (*The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, chapter 22/7).

So, let us start a new journey toward an ever-deeper friendship with Jesus, our Master and Lord, in order to be able to communicate and share Him joyfully and spontaneously with those we meet every day. This could be also a good and timely decision for each of us toward a missionary conversion during the Lenten season which begins next Wednesday.

*Useful points to consider:*

**A. Pope Francis, *Message for World Mission Sunday 2022*:**

The essence of the mission is to bear witness to Christ, that is, to his life, passion, death and resurrection for the love of the Father and of humanity. Not by chance did the apostles look for Judas’ replacement among those who, like themselves, had been witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection (cf. *Acts* 1:21). Christ, indeed Christ risen from the dead, is the One to whom we must testify and whose life we must share. Missionaries of Christ are not sent to communicate themselves, to exhibit their persuasive qualities and abilities or their managerial skills. Instead, theirs is the supreme honour of presenting Christ in words and deeds, proclaiming to everyone the Good News of his salvation, as the first apostles did, with joy and boldness.

**B. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 7-9:**

7. (…) I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

8. Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?

9. Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good. In this regard, several sayings of Saint Paul will not surprise us: “The love of Christ urges us on” (*2 Cor* 5:14); “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel” (*1 Cor* 9:16).