

Pope Benedict XVI's Lenten Message - 2010

"The justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ".

See St Paul's Letter to the Romans 3:21-22

Each year, on the occasion of Lent, the Church invites us to a sincere review of our life in light of the teachings of the Gospel. This year, I would like to offer you some reflections on the great theme of justice, beginning from the Pauline affirmation: 'The justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ'.

First of all, I want to consider the meaning of the term 'justice', which in common usage implies 'to render to every man his due', according to the famous expression of Ulpian, a Roman jurist of the third century. In reality, however, this classical definition does not specify what 'due' is to be rendered to each person. What man needs most cannot be guaranteed to him by law. In order to live life to the full, something more intimate is necessary that can be granted only as a gift: we could say that man lives by that love which only God can communicate since He created the human person in His image and likeness. Material goods are certainly useful and required - indeed Jesus Himself was concerned to heal the sick, feed the crowds that followed Him and surely condemns the indifference that even today forces hundreds of millions into death through lack of food, water and medicine - yet 'distributive' justice does not render to the human being the totality of his 'due'. Just as man needs bread, so does man have even more need of God. St. Augustine notes: if 'justice is that virtue which gives every one his due ... where, then, is the justice of man, when he deserts the true God?'

The Evangelist Mark reports the following words of Jesus, which are inserted within the debate at that time regarding what is pure and impure: 'There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him. ... What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts'. Beyond the immediate question concerning food, we can detect in the reaction of the Pharisees a permanent temptation within man: to situate the origin of evil in an exterior cause. Many modern ideologies deep down have this presupposition: since injustice comes 'from outside', in order for justice to reign, it is sufficient to remove the exterior causes that prevent it being achieved. This way of thinking - Jesus warns - is ingenuous and short-sighted. Injustice, the fruit of evil, does not have exclusively external roots; its origin lies in the human heart, where the seeds are found of a mysterious co-operation with evil. With bitterness the Psalmist recognises this: 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me'. Indeed, man is weakened by an intense influence, which wounds his capacity to enter into communion with the other. By nature, he is open to sharing freely, but he finds in his being a strange force of gravity that makes him turn in and affirm himself above and against others: this is egoism, the result of original sin. Adam and Eve, seduced by Satan's lie, snatching the mysterious fruit against the divine command, replaced the logic of trusting in Love with that of suspicion and competition; the logic of receiving and trustfully expecting from the Other with anxiously seizing and doing on one's own, experiencing, as a consequence, a sense of disquiet and uncertainty. How can man free himself from this selfish influence and open himself to love?

At the heart of the wisdom of Israel, we find a profound link between faith in God who 'lifts the needy from the ash heap' and justice towards one's neighbour. The Hebrew word itself that indicates the virtue of justice, 'sedaqah', expresses this well. 'Sedaqah', in fact,

signifies on the one hand full acceptance of the will of the God of Israel; on the other hand, equity in relation to one's neighbour, especially the poor, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. But the two meanings are linked because giving to the poor for the Israelite is none other than restoring what is owed to God, who had pity on the misery of His people. It was not by chance that the gift to Moses of the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai took place after the crossing of the Red Sea. Listening to the Law presupposes faith in God who first 'heard the cry' of His people and 'came down to deliver them out of hand of the Egyptians'. God is attentive to the cry of the poor and in return asks to be listened to: He asks for justice towards the poor, the stranger, the slave. In order to enter into justice, it is thus necessary to leave that illusion of self-sufficiency, the profound state of closure, which is the very origin of injustice. In other words, what is needed is an even deeper 'exodus' than that accomplished by God with Moses, a liberation of the heart, which the Law on its own is powerless to realize. Does man have any hope of justice then?

The Christian Good News responds positively to man's thirst for justice, as St. Paul affirms in the Letter to the Romans: 'But now the justice of God has been manifested apart from law ... the justice of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by His blood, to be received by faith'.

What then is the justice of Christ? Above all, it is the justice that comes from grace, where it is not man who makes amends, heals himself and others. The fact that 'expiation' flows from the 'blood' of Christ signifies that it is not man's sacrifices that free him from the weight of his faults, but the loving act of God Who opens Himself in the extreme, even to the point of bearing in Himself the 'curse' due to man so as to give in return the 'blessing' due to God. But this raises an immediate objection: what kind of justice is this where the just man dies for the guilty and the guilty receives in return the blessing due to the just one? Would this not mean that each one receives the contrary of his 'due'? In reality, here we discover divine justice, which is so profoundly different from its human counterpart. God has paid for us the price of the exchange in His Son, a price that is truly exorbitant. Before the justice of the Cross, man may rebel for this reveals how man is not a self-sufficient being, but in need of Another in order to realize himself fully. Conversion to Christ, believing in the Gospel, ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one's own need - the need of others and God, the need of His forgiveness and His friendship.

So we understand how faith is altogether different from a natural, good-feeling, obvious fact: humility is required to accept that I need Another to free me from 'what is mine', to give me gratuitously 'what is His'. This happens especially in the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Thanks to Christ's action, we may enter into the 'greatest' justice, which is that of love, the justice that recognises itself in every case more a debtor than a creditor, because it has received more than could ever have been expected. Strengthened by this very experience, the Christian is moved to contribute to creating just societies, where all receive what is necessary to live according to the dignity proper to the human person and where justice is enlivened by love.

Dear brothers and sisters, Lent culminates in the Paschal Triduum, in which this year, too, we shall celebrate divine justice - the fullness of charity, gift, salvation. May this penitential season be for every Christian a time of authentic conversion and intense knowledge of the mystery of Christ, who came to fulfil every justice. With these sentiments, I cordially impart to all of you my apostolic blessing.