

Homily

“Seeing with the eyes of the heart”

International Seminar “Women and Work”

Chapel of “Villa Aurelia”
Saturday 5 December 2015, 8.00 a.m.

(Mt 9:35-10:1.6-8)

Your Eminence, Dear Bishop,
Dear brothers in priestly service,
Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

In three days’ time, on December 8th, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Year of Mercy, so wished for by Pope Francis, will begin¹. In today’s Gospel we hear a phrase that expresses the deep compassion and mercy that Jesus has for the crowds he meets as he passes through the towns and villages: “Seeing the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were tired and lost, like sheep without a shepherd” - “Ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους ἐσπλαγγνίσθη περὶ αὐτῶν ὅτι ἦσαν ἐσκυλμένοι καὶ ἐρριμμένοι ὡσεὶ πρόβατα μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα” (*Mt 9,36*).²

1. Jesus’ extraordinary ability to see things

Jesus is announcing the Coming of the Kingdom of God and healing all sorts of illnesses and infirmities he encounters on his way. His predication is through words and works. The miracles (e.g. healings) and the wondrous gestures confirm his authority of his teaching and give credibility to his mission. Several times people observe that Jesus teaches with extraordinary authority (cf. *Mt 7:29*). Each of these dimensions compliments the other, and this happens thanks to how his eyes are open to reality around him, to people and to their situations.

As the first aspect of my reflection, I would like to pause on how Jesus sees. Many Gospel texts point out Jesus’ extraordinary capacity to see things. Jesus sees the true

¹ FRANCIS, *Misericordiae vultus*. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, April 11 2015, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2015 (= *MV*).

² Cf. *MV* 8.

needs of the great and the small, the poor and the rich (cf. *Mc* 10: 21), individuals and crowds (cf. *Mt* 5:1; 8:14; *Mc* 6: 34), and even of entire peoples.

If we think of Jesus meeting with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector: The Gospel of Luke says: “Jesus looked up and said to him: “Zacchaeus, come down immediately, because today I must stay in your house” (cf. *Lk.* 19: 5). Jesus notices Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree and immediately perceives his interior need. In other words, Jesus sees what others do not see or do not want to see.

In the same sense, Pope Francis gives this exhortation in the Bull of Indiction of the Year of Mercy: Let us open our eyes to see the misery of the world, the wounds of so many brothers and sisters deprived of their dignity, and let us allow ourselves to be provoked into listening to their cry for help”³.

Mona women and many men among our contemporaries are overloaded with images – on computers and cell-phones, for example – and yet do not see other people, or only see them when they enter a particular field of interest to them. In other cases, only the surface is seen: people content themselves with what appears, or even to live for appearances. The surface of things has become the open space for encounters, exchanging ideas, and sometimes even for fixing life’s definitive projects.

2. *Jesus sees with the eyes of the heart*

Jesus’ way of seeing is rather different to all this: it goes beyond the physical capacity of his eyes and involves the intimate parts of his person, as is clear from today’s Gospel: “Seeing the crowds, he had compassion for them”. The Greek verb used by Matthew to indicate compassion - σπλαγχνίζομαι (“splagchnizomai”) – occurs four times in reference to Jesus in this Gospel (cf. *Mt* 9:36; 14:14; 18:27; 20:34), and always expresses his *compassion* or his *mercy*.

This verb, σπλαγχνίζομαι (splagchnizomai) has its linguistic root in the noun σπλάγχνον (splagchnon) which literally means the internal organs of the human person: the bowels. In this sense, Pope Francis affirms: “In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a “visceral” love.”⁴

The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s Gospel (cf. *Lk.* 10,31-37) illustrates the intimate connection between seeing and compassion when we are faced to face with

³ *MV* 15.

⁴ Cf. *MV* 6.

someone has been wounded or robbed. There is the priest who is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho “when he *saw* him, he passed by on the other side”, and there is the Levite who does the same. This type of seeing moves us further away from others, because it does not want to acknowledge their needs.

The Samaritan, on the contrary, shows a different attention and ability_ “he *saw* him and had compassion for him” - “Σαμαρίτης δέ τις ὁδεύων ἦλθεν κατ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγγίσθη” (cf. *Lk.* 10:33). This way of looking at things makes people closer to each other, this way of seeing involves the deeper parts of the person and provokes the only response that is truly human: having compassion and offering to help someone in their extreme need.

In a pedagogy inspired by Christian faith, the teaching on how to see things correctly, how to see in a complete and deep way, should have pride of place. As a precondition for a truly human life, we need “schools of good vision”, to teach an “*ars bene videndi*”, where my neighbour is an integrated part of my visual field: a way of seeing that acknowledges my neighbour’s true needs.

3. The sheep are tired and helpless, without a shepherd

As a third aspect of this meditation, I would like to consider the contents of how Jesus looks at the crowds who are tired and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (cf. *Mt* 9:36). Jesus’ analysis is very contemporary_ every day we can meet people who are tired and disorientated, who lack a reliable guide or who have trusted false prophets. It seems to me that in recent decades the number of people who find themselves in these situations has greatly increased: people in situations of tiredness and exhaustion, without a meaning or a direction for their lives.

Our brief journey has invited us to see and acknowledge our own responsibility as disciples of the Lord. The Lord encourages us, first of all, to fulfil our obligation to pray: “The harvest is abundant but the workers are few. Pray, therefore, to the Lord of the harvest that he might send workers to his harvest!”.

We generally remember these words in the context of a prayer for vocations to priesthood and religious life, but I would like to broaden our perspective in order to include a prayer for all the vocations that in so many different ways work at the Lord’s harvest, and to include all of our undertakings to propose guidance and orientation to others.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today’s Gospel invites us to do three things: see – have compassion – advise /teach, all of this accompanied by intense prayer. In the Bull of Indiction for the Year of

Mercy, Pope Francis reminds us that alongside the corporal works of mercy, there are spiritual works of mercy, often forgotten: “counsel the doubting, teach the ignorant, admonish sinners, console the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear wrongs patiently, pray to God for the living and for the dead”.⁵

In this Jubilee year let us commit ourselves, in our families, our workplaces and our leisure time, to carrying out these spiritual works of mercy – these are not easy things to do. This is the Gospel message for this day in Advent that precedes by only a few days this particular time of Divine Mercy and Mercy’s compassionate reply.

Pope Francis concludes the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year looking to Mary, the Mother of God.⁶ Let us join him in praying on this first Saturday of Advent: “Mother of Mercy, pray for us!”

Amen.

✠ *Bishop Josef Clemens,*
Secretary, Pontifical Council for the Laity,
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⁵ MV 15; cfr. Luciano Manicardi, *Le opere di misericordia*, Edizioni CVS, Roma 2015, 63-118.

⁶ Cf. MV 24.