

May 25, 2008

Sermon by The Rev. Adolfo Ham

Based on Math. 6.24-34

SEEK FIRST THE JUSTICE OF THE KINGDOM

We read amusingly this portion of the Sermon on the Mount!. Do we believe in its message? No, we do not believe in it! It is too idealistic for us!. It reflects the kind of simple life of indigenous, simple, naive people!. Actually we live in a kind of society and world relations which are a total negation of the spirit of this passage. Therefore in order to save the world and humankind we need to enliven the spirituality conveyed in this perikope. It is clear that in the Bible the poor (the anawim) are the righteous, while the rich are the unrighteous, there is a bias, but it is not a stereotype.

V. 24 "No one can serve two masters, you cannot serve God and Mammon". This saying is peculiar because it conveys that the undivided loyalty is threatened by the service to another deity, Mammon, which is directly opposed to God! It is the pseudo-deity of materialism "This choice is a clear-cut, without allowing compromises; it sets up the alternative terms: service vs. enslavement, hatred vs. love, devotion vs. contempt, external materialism vs. internal dedication, slavery of the money lovers vs. freedom of the 'sons of God'"(Betz) "Mammon" is an aramaic word, which designates wealth and property, as a personified and demonic force. It is rare in the NT, it appears also only in Lk. 16. 9,11, where it is translated as "unjust riches". Money and possessions can possess people. The worship of the one God is the best way of keeping ourselves free from the enslavement of materialism. A clear choice has to be made. We must say again the words of Elijah on top of Mount Carmel in front of the prophets of Baal: "How long do you mean to halt between two opinions, if the Lord is God follow him, if Baal follow him!" (1 Kings 18.21).

Vv 25-34 On anxiety.- We can recall the three beautiful books of sermons by S. Kierkegaard on this passage! It refers to the question of sustenance in the larger context of creation by God and God's providence. Q.v. the well known "The age of Anxiety" by W.H. Auden. It is interesting that from way back into Hellenistic and Roman times anxiety was a popular theme and an important philosophical topic. Horace says for instance, that cura has been the inseparable companion of human beings who want to flee from her. We can affirm that there is a profound crisis of faith in the providence of God. It is interesting and surprising to see the positive and poetical way in which nature is conceived here, because in general the natural order is not much of interest in the NT. Perhaps because of the problems with beauty in the Bible! This passage confronts pessimism and skepticism radically. We can experience daily the goodness of life!: sunrise, sun set, rain, bread, birds, plants, etc. The simple experiences of life are a demonstration of God's providence! Of course, this is not an idyllic picture, which ignores pain and evil in the world. We can see in the beatitudes, in the beginnings of the Sermon, for instance, poverty, injustice, sorrow, etc. even floods and storms at the end of it.

v.25 "Do not worry! Is very categorical. It is repeated in 28,31 and 34. Many of us have the habit of worrying for many things. (Q.V. How to stop worrying and start living by Dale Carnegie!) It is important here, because of ecology now, to differentiate between taking care and protecting life, than to be preoccupied with the means of life for our own satisfaction and not for the rest of people. And perhaps the main problem is that we confuse what are the proper concerns for one's life/soul/self with an improper obsession with regard to the means of life. We need to know the difference from what is important and unimportant for ourselves. "What we shall eat and what we shall drinkâ".some people are more interested in drinking than eating! And in Spanish we say "no es lo mismo comer para vivir, que vivir para comer"! And what we shall dress (Cf. the famous catwalks of C. Klein, Christian Dior, Beneton, etc.) "Life is more than nourishment and the body is more than clothing!" Notice here the contrast between life vs. means of life; body, vs. garments for the body.

The example of birds (26-27) (1st. argument) and of the lilies (28-30) (2nd. argument). "The reason why animal behavior was accepted in antiquity as a model for human behavior was because animals were seen as still an integral part of nature, while humans as a result of civilization, have become at least partially alienated from nature"(Betz) Take a look to nature! Learn how to look at things! Clear vision requires a healthy heart and mind and consumerism blinds us.

v. 27 This expression is interesting "We are unable to add a single span of life". It means that God is who measures out the periods of our lives, hence if all future depends on God's hands then it is foolish to worry about the future. Then human anxiety over the future is presumptuous.

v.29 Solomon's beautiful garments. Beauty in nature is seen in the Bible as a reflection of divine beauty. God is beautiful and the beauty of the world is a reflection, a mirror image of his beauty, as it has been said rightly by mystics. If God cares for the small creatures, he will care for the human beings, he will provide for them all the necessary things, so there is no reason to worry about the perishability of things.

v33.- Justice is the quality which characterizes the reign of God and God himself. The question of what are the proper necessities of life has been debated since antiquity. What does it mean for us that they are gifts from God?, they are not rewards as the Jews thought, they are part of the continuous creation in which God is engaged. Notice here the strong contrast between the two verbs "to be worried, to be anxious" (merimnao) and to "seek, to be determined in searching" (zeteo)

v. 34 The 3rd. argument-"Do not be anxious about tomorrow, tomorrow will worry about itself". The parallel version in Lk.12.32 is different, so this is an enigmatic saying that is not found elsewhere in the NT. But it is used widely in antiquity: carpe diem! ("Use the day while it lasts").

34c "sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (cf. Eccl. 7.14; 12.1) If we do not have any power on the future, the coming day, WE DO HAVE POWER OVER THE PRESENT! The right way to care for today is not to be anxious, but to seek the justice of the kingdom in the troubles of each day. It means freedom from the practical troubles of the present. So long as we worry on anxiously over tomorrow, we will not responsibly tackle the problems of today.

I have chosen also the text 1 Cor. 4.1 "we are stewards of the mysteries of God". This is the Biblical attitude to the gifts of God's creation. If we are good stewards we will have the spirituality of the SM.

The spirituality of this passage is about being and not having. I recall here the teachings of G. Marcel (Être et avoir, Paris 1935) and E. Fromm (To Have or to Be, 1976)

G. Marcel says: look at the difference between having a house and being hospitable; the moment I have a body it is not my body; we do not have hope, we are hope. "Having implies always an obscure notion of assimilation". Meeting another person is always on the level of being and not having.

E. Fromm.- He argues about freedom from the possessive attitude of the ego. Some people have the exploitative orientation: people expect to have to take what they need, wealth is stolen, ideas plagiarized, love achieved by coercion. Others have the marketing orientation: success is a matter of how well I can sell myself.

Alan Durning (Northwest Environmental Watch in Seattle) says: "The world's people have consumed as many goods and services since 1950 as all previous generations put together".

20% of the human population consumes 80% of the resources. Are you familiar with the Agape programme of WCC and related organizations? The idea began in the WCC General Assembly of Harare (1998) and in the Assembly of Porto Alegre (2006) the call was launched- The Agape (also the acronym for "Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth") booklet (2006), published by the WCC "Justice, Peace and Creation Team" pleads for "An Economy of Life". It reminds us that the main characteristics of God's

household of life are:

*The bounty of the gracious economy of God offers and sustains abundance for all; *God's gracious economy requires that we manage the abundance of life in a just, participatory and sustainable manner; *The economy of God is an economy of life that promotes sharing, globalized solidarity, the dignity of persons, and love and care for the integrity of creation, *God's economy is an economy for the whole oikoumene, the whole earth community; and *God's justice and preferential option for the poor are the mark's of God's economy. Another recent booklet published by this WCC programme is "Poverty, Wealth and Ecology, the impact of Economic Globalization" (2008). One of the study recommendations is to "establish a greed line": "absolute greed" (super abundance vs. maximum poverty); "income ratios" (the existing poverty line), "lines of categorical types of enrichment" (unethical sources of income or property). How do we rate ourselves here in the light of Jesus' words?.

M. Luther in one of his sermons in 1530/32, commenting on the conclusion of the SM: "If we always measured our life and actions by this standard, we could not carry in such a brutish way and throw his teaching into the wind. But we would have more than enough to do, and become ourselves masters, in effect teaching ourselves what we ought to do. Then we would not need to chase after holy life and holy works, nor would we need so many lawyers and law books. Thus, this teaching is concisely formulated and can soon be learned, if only there is the diligence and sincerity to do and live accordingly".