

John 3: 16-18

16 Indeed, God loved the world in this way: he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him should not die, but have an endless life. 17 For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to let the world be liberated through him. 18 He who believes in him is not condemned. But he who does not believe in him has condemned himself, for he has not put his trust in the person of the only son of God.

Gospel commentary - Homily

Who are we?

They are three white women, a mother and two daughters. They left South Africa following the collapse of the apartheid system. The violence that raged there was so great that the environment had become unlivable. In the evening, by car, they did not stop at the red light, for fear of being attacked by a passer-by. A gun should always be on hand to deal with any eventuality. This is how their migration led them to Canada, to the quietest city possible, very close to where I live.

It should be noted that the mother, Amanda, is widowed after her husband died of cancer. One of her daughters, the youngest, suffers from a significant intellectual disability following a childhood illness. The other daughter, who works for an international firm, is committed to looking after her whole life after the needs of her sister and mother. You could say that this family has finally found the place to flourish and experience a little happiness. However, the sun does not seem to shine very strongly. The house appears barricaded as if we were still in South Africa. Amanda recalls with regret the time when she owned a large estate, and her adopted country does not bring her everything that her country of origin gave her. But above all there is her handicapped daughter: she does not obey every word she says, does not do everything that she asks her to do, is not hard working as she would like to see. When one hears her verbal abuse when she talks about her daughter, one is not surprised to learn that everything turns from time to time to physical abuse on the part of the daughter. Thus at the beginning of her 87 years, Amanda appears as a bitter and soured woman. It is a little sad to see all the distance traveled to reach such a dark house, where life does not seem to flow. What happened?

Amanda's story will serve as a setting for reflecting on this short passage from the Gospel of John. Because it is important to keep our feet firmly on the ground, while this text brings us to theological heights, especially when we read it on the occasion of the feast of the Trinity, a time when one can fall into religious lyricism.

Before studying the language of the evangelist, let us consider what it is about here. The subject is the ignominious death of Jesus like a bandit, condemned by both religious and political authorities. At the very beginning of the Christian community, the subject of Jesus' ignominious death was taboo: completely normal, because who would not have been a little ashamed. It was Saint Paul who dared to tackle the subject head on and say aloud that, even if this death appeared scandalous, he took pride in it: what appeared madness and weakness, was in fact wisdom and strength. The evangelist John will speak rather of cross elevation (see the previous verse) and glorification to designate the same reality. Let us think about it: what is normally seen as a failure and a humiliation, is presented as a summit, as the expression of an exceptional and unique quality of being.

Let us read again the Gospel text. "Indeed, God loved the world in this way: he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him does not die, but has an endless life. The whole of Jesus' life, including his scandalous death, is presented as a gift from God. We no longer allude to the human wickedness that led to the abrupt end of his life. No. We only mention one gift in love. And this gift is described as the "only son" (literally in the Greek text: "son, the only begotten") of God. In other words, Jesus has this unique relationship with God, so that to see him is also to see God: his being is the mirror of God. And how can such a dramatic reality of a life ending in a tragic death become a gift? One answer: love. The life of Jesus is presented as a gift from the love of God, and that love continued through his whole life. Love appears as a reality which is transmitted from father to son, as a living reality which is communicated. So we are not totally surprised to read the final text: the person who welcomes the son, welcomes the same living reality, "an endless life". Because love and life are synonymous. This is how events that we would like to eliminate from the world, such as human wickedness and tragic death, have become a source of life.

All of this may seem both beautiful and far from us. One can look with detached eyes at this Father, source of love, a love that was lived concretely through the life of Jesus, a love that continues and crosses the world, which is called Spirit. And with the same detachment, one claims to believe in the mystery of the Trinity. What one does not understand is that we are talking about us, about what we really are. And not grasping it condemns us to be miserable all our life.

There are many things in our life over which we have no control. It is a disabled child or a country that we had to flee, like Amanda. It is a separation or a divorce that leaves traces on the child. It is mourning. It is a job that does not live up to our expectations and our abilities. Whatever. Everyone has his list. The question becomes: beyond the initial shock, after the last tear, what do I do now? I have the choice to keep repeating endlessly: this is not true! Or to say: it's true, it's my reality; now how can we live it properly? This is where we can talk about welcoming in faith: my decision to believe consists in accepting my situation and seeing it as a source of love and life. And I cannot make this decision if I do not perceive myself as a being full of love and life, and if I do not come to terms with what I am fundamentally. I say well: come to terms. Because it is a reality that is already there, like the blood in our veins. But, sometimes unconsciously, we seek to stop this dynamic reality, rather than let ourselves be carried by it; we seek to control it, rather than let it control us. Also, we need help finding out who we are. It is the role of Jesus, like many of his witnesses who take the same path. Then we realize that we are inhabited by the same love and the same life, and that ultimately, this reality is the very substance of God.

So far I haven't used the word, but we are all Trinitarian realities. This is what the evangelist John tries to translate in a thousand and one ways. The love that dwells in God was transmitted in Jesus who not only made his life of it, but transmitted it to humanity so that all reality, joyful or unhappy, became the source of life. By opening up to this love that is already there deep within us, we participate in the same life. Unfortunately, when one closes oneself to it, when one focuses on things which are no longer reality, one condemns oneself to die, or to use the words of the evangelist: "he who does not believe in him has condemned himself". Because to believe, is above all welcoming the present reality, to surrender to what lives in us, to accept what we really are, our Trinitarian being. If only Amanda could discover this, the sun would enter her house.