

16) "Who is my neighbor?"

"Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'"

Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers...' (Lk 10:25ss.).

The parable of the "good Samaritan" is inserted into the dialogue between a scholar of the law and Jesus, a dialogue full of questions from both sides, and it is the play of these questions that is very illuminating for the conversion which Jesus demands of the doctor of the Law and of each of us.

The immediate question that provokes Jesus' parable is: "And who is my neighbor?" But one should not forget that this question is the consequence of another: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The first question, though posed by the lawyer to put Jesus to the test, is the fundamental question, because it concerns the meaning of life and our responsibility regarding our destiny. Every man bears in himself the desire for a full life, the desire to live well, to reach the goal of life, an eternal life. Jesus sends this man back to the tradition in which he was formed and of which he is a scholar. Indeed, God revealed to the Hebrews the path of eternal life, which requires basically the love of God and of the neighbor. This man knows it, he knows his catechism by memory: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

There's nothing but living this out for making us happy. But this man, who wanted to put Jesus to the test, finds himself put to the test in turn. He must admit that between the catechism and concrete life, things are not so obvious. Yes, of course, it would be enough to love God and neighbor, but in fact, in practice, the love of neighbor is often compromised by the people who are near us. Might there not be a definition of "neighbor" that would allow us to love our neighbor without too many disagreements? The man is forced to depart from his catechism and to pose a question that comes not only from his heart that thirsts for eternal life, but from his everyday life: "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus has thus already achieved a success over this man: he has forced him to make the connection between the question about eternal life and the one about love of the other. Probably at first the scholar of the Law did not connect the question about the meaning of life with anything but the question about the love of God. The love of neighbor was a secondary question, aside from the religious question on which he had focused, also because it was his occupation.

"And who is my neighbor?" You get the impression that the question escapes from him against his will and that he bites his tongue right after pronouncing it. But it is already too late, and Jesus has already begun telling his parable.

And at the end of the parable, Jesus surprises the lawyer with another question: “Which of the three seems to you to have been the neighbor of him who had fallen in the hands of robbers?” And he asks him to be that merciful neighbor who the Samaritan was for the wounded man: “Go, and do likewise.” Which means: You, too, be the neighbor of your neighbor; concern yourself with being the neighbor of the others.

Thus, the scholar of the Law was led by Jesus to develop, passing from one question to another, toward the true question that we must ask ourselves if we want “to inherit eternal life.” The first question that the lawyer asks himself and asks Jesus is: “What must I do?” He considers himself, but on the level of *doing*, not of *being*. The second question is: “Who is my neighbor?” It is no longer a “what?” but a “who?”; a more personal question, therefore. But the “who?” is still the others, not himself, the scholar of the Law. The Gospel does not transmit the third question explicitly, but we read it in the man’s thought, if he actually listened to Jesus. This must have been: “Am I the neighbor of the others?” It is the essential question, because it concerns the subject who asks it. It is a way of asking oneself: “Who am I?”, which is a question that is fundamental to being aware of one’s own identity, but the question is asked before others, in relation with others. Jesus leads this man to understand that he can no longer ask the question about the path of his life, about his eternal destiny, nor about the others, unless he starts by asking the question about himself in relationship with the others, about himself in relation with his neighbor. Others, above all the poor and the wounded, the victims of evil and of wickedness, are part of the definition of our “I.”

And we who live in community, in relation with so many people present or absent, we too must let ourselves be led by Jesus to ask this question: “Am I the neighbor of the others? Am I the neighbor of my brothers? Am I the neighbor of that particular brother or sister, of this person whom I meet and who needs my love, my presence, my listening, my concern, my compassion?”

When one carries this question in his heart, the others, even if they “bother” us, become an encounter that is always precious and blessed, because they enable us to become truly ourselves, as God wants us and loves us. They enable us to begin sharing in eternal life.

We have seen that Jesus leads the scholar of the Law, to whom he recounts the parable of the good Samaritan, to ask himself the true question: “Am I the neighbor of the others?”, and to ask it in the true form of the fundamental question—“Who am I?”—and as a path toward the eternal life which the man desires. Jesus leads him to understand that the question about the meaning of his life should not be asked only with respect to his “I” or only in relation to others. It is a question which should be neither egoistic nor altruistic. The question of the meaning of life is taken up adequately only if one does not separate one’s own “I” from the other, from the neighbor, nor the other from one’s own “I.” To say “I, I, I” and to say “others, others, others” are equally wrong. Jesus brings the man to refocus and rebalance the problem of eternal life by asking himself if his “I” is near, or more, if it is the neighbor of the other. Redefining oneself as the neighbor of the other situates the “I” in its true sphere, the sphere of its truth, and the others in the sphere of their truth.