

## 17) The reaction of responsibility

Defining ourselves as the neighbor of the other, or at least to make the question about ourselves coincide with the question about whether we are the neighbor of the other, allows us to recognize our person as responsible liberty. To be true human beings, it is not enough to be free. One is a true human being if freedom is responsible, that is, if it responds, if it places itself before the question of the other, if it opens itself to the question of the other, to the question that the other is. The question of the other, therefore his need, extends to us the gift of becoming responsible, of being truly free up to the very end, to love, to charity.

Being a neighbor does not mean only being next to someone, being near. That is how the priest and the Levite of the parable pass near the wounded man. They pass nearby, they are near, but they are not neighbors, because they do not respond to the other's need, they are not *responsible*.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, responds, and that makes of him a neighbor, it renders his "I" a neighbor. For him, finding himself there is not an accident, like it was for the other two. "Now by chance a priest was going down that road..." (Lk 10:31). The priest is there *by chance*, in Latin, *accidit autem...* it is an accident, it is a chance that he is there. It was a chance for the Samaritan, too, but he stopped, and then it is no longer a matter of chance, an accident, because he decides to become his neighbor: "he came near him" (10:33).

The freedom which decides in favor of responsibility transforms all "chances" into events of eternal life. And it is, indeed, the reflex of responsibility that defines the identity of the actors in that situation.

It is to this point that Jesus wants to lead the question about the fullness of life and the question about who the other is, and above all the question about who I am. The true question is: "Who am I for the others?" The true question is if I am the neighbor of the others or not, if I respond or not to the other's need. It is on this that Jesus wants us to focus our self-examination, our judgment on who we are, and the effective task of our life.

Jesus wilfully assigns the lead role to a Samaritan, to a person out of sorts and broken off from the Hebrew religion. For the Hebrews, the Samaritans were almost worse than the pagans. Jesus acts thus to make us understand that the question of our responsibility toward one in need must come before the question whether we are or are not religiously adequate to obtain eternal life.

When one correctly asks the question "Who am I?", or when one asks it in the sphere of truth and reality which are the relationships that make up our life, the "What to do?" of the lawyer's first question can also come up again. When he put it at the beginning ("Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"), his idea of commitment, his idea of "doing," and therefore his idea of what "loving" means, was too abstract; it was a formula, a theoretical problem; it was not yet the life of that man. After listening to the parable of Jesus, the need to define one's own "I" in regard to the other, in relation to the other, with the man in trouble, makes the question about "what to do," the question of commitment, become truly concrete, real.

It is a very different thing to ask oneself in abstract what one must do to inherit eternal life, imagining eternal life for oneself, than to ask oneself this question in front of someone who is lying half dead at our feet and who will die in the end if we do not do something. Thus, the other whom I allow to become the definition of my "I" ("*I am his neighbor*") makes love become life and reality for me.

What is important, therefore, is this reflex of responsibility before the need of the other. And this, as the parable makes quite clear, is in the end a matter of an instant. For the three people who were passing along that street, it is in an instant that the path of their life is defined, as also their identity. The priest and the Levite, by refusing, for a thousand reasons, to allow the reflex to take place that would have led their freedom over into responsibility, kept on their way without becoming a neighbor. Apparently nothing in their life was changed, but this is exactly the problem. Nothing was changed exteriorly, but ontologically, they continued their life less "neighbor" than before, or not becoming a neighbor at all. They continued to live through the same things, but with an "I" that was poorer in humanity, more selfish, less free, less alive, less loving toward man, and therefore more sterile, more sad. Less free, because freedom that does not become responsibility dries up, becomes less itself, less capable of free acts. It is like a muscle that does not get used: it gets stiff, becomes paralyzed.

For the Samaritan, the reflex of free responsibility before the man in trouble caused a change of life; a change only the beginning of which Jesus imagines and recounts, but which is presented as a dawn of new life. He too, if he had been a real person, would probably have continued to live as before: family, work, friends, trips... but he would have continued to live the same things with an "I" that had become more a neighbor of man, and therefore more free to follow a path of life not determined beforehand, not closed up in an individual project.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus describes the first steps of a new life, and it is worthwhile for us to meditate on them, because they help us understand better what the reflex of responsibility means, and therefore what it means to become the neighbor of the other. And we should not forget that this is the same as understanding what it means to love God and our neighbor, as God asks of us, and therefore what it means to be participate in eternal life, to live an eternal life.

What is it that incites, that stirs up responsibility? What made it such that, in the Samaritan, the responsibility reflex took place, and not in the others? Why did he make himself the neighbor of the wounded man, and not the others?

In the parable, Jesus gives a single reason for this reaction: pity, mercy: "But a Samaritan while travelling came near him [the other two got to this point; up to this point no reaction has taken place; up to this point freedom has done nothing but undergo the things that presented themselves; up to this point there was no difference between the wounded man who lay on the ground and the street's stones or the trees that flanked it...]; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity" (Lk 10:33).

The reflex, or the leap, is entirely in pity, in compassion.