

The Krijtberg, 30-09-2023, 26th Sunday through the year. Ez. 18:25-28, Mt. 21:28-32.

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REPENTANCE AND LIFE

Ezekiel

There was a time when everything seemed to be heading in the right direction. But it seems that this belief in progress has since given way to a belief in doom. All sorts of facts seem to prove the doomsayers right: natural disasters and war far and nearby. It is as if we are doomed to decline and ruin.

Such thinking is of all times. Ezekiel was already dealing with it, but he opposes it. At a time when children were thought to have to pay for their parents' mistakes, Ezekiel speaks a word against this: *Why do you keep repeating this proverb... : The parents have eaten unripe grapes; and the children get blunt teeth?... you will have no further cause to repeat this proverb* (Ez. 18:2-3). Children are not damned because their parents were bad. In the first reading, Ezekiel goes a step further by arguing that you are also not determined by your own wrong deeds in the past. He says: *A wicked person who turns away from his wicked way of life and henceforth acts according to law and justice will remain alive* (18:27). But the reverse is also true: *A good person who no longer behaves righteously but commits injustice will die...* (18:26).

So Ezekiel teaches us, you are not determined by what others have done before you, but also not by your own past decisions, by your past deeds. On the one hand, the good that is in you, your virtue, is contested, you can lose it, it is not an inalienable possession, you have to make it your own each time. But, on the other hand, when you have not done well, you are given new opportunities every time; evil, too, is not an inalienable possession, you can lay it off.

Finally, Ezekiel encourages his audience by pointing out that God wants life: *Would I take pleasure in the death of the wicked – declares the Lord God – and not prefer to see him renounce his wickedness and live?* (18:23). Ezekiel therefore ends his prophecy with an appeal: *I take no pleasure in the death of anyone – declares the Lord God – so repent and live!* (18:32). Our future is in our own hands. Whether this future is life depends on us. As for God, He wants us to live.

Matthew

So much for the prophet's message. Now the gospel. What Matthew has to say is not so different from Ezekiel's call. Jesus tells a short parable about a father who asked his sons to go and work in his vineyard. One said yes, but didn't go. The other said no, changed his mind and went after all.

The one who said yes is the religious establishment: the high priests and elders. They are convinced that they know and maintain the rules. Therefore, they do not see that they make mistakes. They don't let John the Baptist and Jesus correct them. The others who said no and did it anyway are the tax collectors and the whores, the sinners and the Gentiles. They were corrected by John and by Jesus. Therefore, they enter the kingdom of God.

So with Matthew, too, it appears that, like Ezekiel, a pious past is no guarantee, and virtue is not an inalienable possession. Only those who believe John and Jesus will enter the kingdom of God. On the other hand: you are not determined by a less virtuous past. You are always given new opportunities. The Kingdom of God remains open to whoever wants it.

The words of Ezekiel and of Jesus exhort us not to be paralysed by the past. Those who think themselves wise and pious are urged to be open to criticism. And those who do not consider themselves wise or virtuous, but feel anxious and threatened, insecure and powerless, disappointed and bitter, are urged not to let themselves be determined by such feelings. These feelings suffocate and paralyse and blind you to the new opportunities that are offered. The Kingdom of God, the kingdom of peace and justice, God's new world, can only come when you believe in its possibility. This kingdom only becomes a reality whenever you choose it. Our initial no can always be transformed into a yes. Thus all, pious or not pious, are called to repent again and again, not to be paralysed by their own opinions and principles, or feelings of helplessness and despair. Through the words of the prophets Ezekiel, John and Jesus, the living God challenges us to stay alive.