

"FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE ALSO FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS".

Purpose: becoming aware of our sins and the need for salvation.

Grace: profession of faith in the merciful God, who forgives our sins.

1. The version of the Lord's Prayer that we find in Mt 6:12 speaks of debts either that we ask God to forgive us or that we undertake to forgive our debtors, while the one in Lk 11:4 speaks of sins that we ask God to forgive us and of forgiveness that we give to each of our debtors. The two expressions are equivalent, and from them we derive that every sin of ours, even if apparently not directed directly against God, is a debt that we establish with God. Sin, in fact, is not simply an ethical fact, i.e. concerning our behaviour towards others, but in its essence is a religious fact, i.e. concerning the relationship between us and God.

Since one of the two terms of sin is God, and he is the creditor, then with sin comes a debt of such proportions that man in his finiteness cannot pay.

God is the Lord and Creator of all things, so God has established the way of the realisation of all things, and all things have their value in relation to God. The order of things is given by the reasonableness inherent in them, which is the very reason they exist. Created in the image and likeness of God, we are to exercise dominion over things by discovering the wisdom of God that is hidden in things, and according to that wisdom to dominate, use and develop them, to bring them to their full fulfilment (Wis 9:1-6.9-18). Whenever we depart from such wisdom, we do not only commit a crime against things, but against God. This is even more apparent in our relationship with other human beings. One cannot dominate the other, because the other belongs only to God. God alone is the Lord of man. When we do not respect our fellow human being, we deface the image of God that he bears within him, so we do not only commit a crime against man, but first and foremost against God, because we replace God. It is this that causes the debt to God to arise.

St Paul in Col 2:9-15 teaches us that no human being can pay this debt, but only God Himself, God made man, Jesus Christ.

St Paul makes us understand the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption. Only Christ, God made man, in a vicarious manner, i.e. in place of each individual human being, could pay the debt established between each human being and God. Only humanity divinised in Christ, because united with divinity - human finiteness become infinite - can extinguish the debt for all limited and finite men, unable to do so. As St Paul says, God, by forgiving our sins in Christ's death and resurrection, has cancelled the written record of our debt, nailing it to the cross.

This is because "He who knew no sin, God dealt him as sin for our sake, that we might become through him the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). In fact, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, himself becoming a curse for us, as it is written: Cursed is he who hangs from the wood, so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might pass to the Gentiles and we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal 3:13).

We are urged to be touched by Paul's plea: "We beseech you in the name of Christ: be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20b).

Behind it all is the love of God. God himself coming to meet us to restore the relationship that we continually break and disfigure.

There are two psychological difficulties that man must overcome: that of admitting his sin, that is, his finiteness, his wretchedness, under the ever-present urge to stand up against God in an effort of autonomy, which only then proves to be self-destructive; and that of admitting his inability to reinstate the debt he has contracted and therefore having to accept God's free forgiveness, to be reconciled with God. These difficulties can only be overcome in the acceptance and inner

deepening of the revelation of the infinite merciful love that our Father in heaven has for us who are his children.

3. In an eminent way, Jesus reveals to us the merciful love of the Father in the parable of the two brothers (Lk 15:11-32).

a. In the first part of the parable we are first of all described the degraded situation to which man arrives when he wants to assert his independence from God (vv 11-16).

b. In the second part we have the rebellious son's consideration of his own situation and his decision to return to his father (vv. 16-20a). It is the need that drives him to reconsider his actions and thus to admit to himself that he has done wrong and that away from his father he cannot even provide for his basic needs. The first act is to stop and re-enter himself. It is always hard to come to our senses and consider our mistakes. Instinctively we are led to avoid this. The rebellious young man decides, in an act of humility, to return to his father, ask him for forgiveness, admitting that he has sinned not only towards him, but also towards God. He knows that he has gravely offended his father and God, so he no longer considers himself worthy to be regarded as a son, but wants to humbly ask to be accepted as a servant.

c. The third part of the parable is the acceptance by the father and reinstatement in the dignity of a son (vv. 20b-24). There is here a first revelation of God's merciful love. The father's love goes beyond any hope of the son. The latter, reasoning according to the parameters of a human justice, believes that he cannot be accepted except as a servant. This son embodies our human difficulty in conceiving the infinity of God's love. But the justice of the father goes beyond these calculations and reveals itself to be abundant with gratuitous love. Jesus reveals to us that only God, in his infinity, can forgive the infinite debt that finite man cannot settle.

d. In the fourth part of the story (vv. 25-30) the reaction of the eldest son is described. His sense of order and duty is revealed in his formalism and slothfulness, as his rebellion against his father's behaviour, which is judged unjust, breaks out. He too, like his younger brother, regards what he has as a right and therefore does not want to share it with his brother who has returned. But here we have the second revelation of the love of the father, who takes his cue precisely from the anger and rebellion of the elder son to offer him too the misery he offered his brother, inviting him to reconciliation. The debt that the elder son contracted towards his father is no less than that which the younger son had contracted.

e. The two sons are invited to attend a feast together. God, by pure grace, raises up in the very heart of our sin and death a mystery of resurrection, healing and joy, because it takes place in reconciliation (vv. 31-32).

Jesus reveals to us this mystery of the extent of our sin and of the Father's love. Jesus alone can reveal to us this image of the Father, which challenges all our human images of fatherhood. By revealing how our Father in heaven acts, the parable also reveals to us who it is Jesus who tells the parable. It is God himself made man who promises and works the reconciliation of all sinners, inviting them to the messianic banquet of eternal life. Here we find the answer to the scandalised statement of the Pharisees and scribes: "He receives sinners and eats with them" (Mt 15:1-3), which gives the parable its pretext.

Paul's plea still resounds here: "We beseech you in the name of Christ: be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20b), which involves reconciliation with others.

3. Jesus immediately after teaching the disciples the prayer of the Our Father, adds: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt 6:14-15).

If we are not willing to forgive the faults of others, it means that our heart is closed to love and therefore not even willing to receive God's love. That is why we cannot receive his forgiveness. It is not our forgiveness that is the cause of the Father's forgiveness: it is His free gift. It is a disposition of the heart. If the heart is closed to love, God does not force the heart. Love is a proposal, it is not violence.

All this is presented in the parable of the unshared forgiveness or the unforgiving servant, which we find in Matthew 18:21-35.

Peter, asking if he must forgive seven times, thinks he is already in Jesus' perspective, in fact the rabbis allowed up to three times. But Jesus, by telling him that he must forgive seventy times seven, that is, without measure, first of all reveals the unexpected resources that the acceptance of the Kingdom of God, and therefore of the Father's forgiveness, generates in man (vv. 21-22). Before God, we are all insolvent debtors, since we can never return to him what we owe him. The parable reveals the narrowness of the human soul and how unmerciful creditors we can be towards others.

The king is moved by the servant's plea and forgives him the debt (vv. 26-27).

If the servant had received this forgiveness not as a right, but as a free gift of the master's love, he would have been able to forgive his debtor as well (v. 33). The miseri-cordia that the master has granted him remains in the ruthless servant as a prisoner, refusing to communicate it to others (vv. 28-30). Thus the servant is merciless not only towards his brother, but also towards himself, because he prevents God's mercy from entering his heart and lodging there. Freedom from sin cannot be received except by making oneself free from the sin of others. The merciless servant generates scandal. The other servants are grieved by this and then report the matter to their master (v. 31). The scandal generated spills over onto the ruthless servant himself. His lack of mercy becomes an obstacle to his salvation, because, as he does not have a heart disposed to love, he cannot receive it and so the king withdraws his pardon and the servant will remain in his debtor's condition until he has a heart disposed to receive the forgiveness of his debt (vv. 32-35).

In this perspective we understand the mission Christ entrusted to his Church to be the administrator of divine forgiveness (Mt 18:18).

To say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" is to profess our faith in the forgiveness of sins, which we proclaim in the Apostolic Creed; it is to believe in the infinitely merciful love of God, who reveals himself as Father, above all human paternity, because no sin can affect his love; it is to allow ourselves to be reconciled with God, so that we can be reconciled with others. If we are not able to reconcile with others, it means that we have not accepted the reconciliation that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

As we pray, have a conversation with Jesus, imagining him present and placed on the cross, considering how as a creator he became man and subjected himself to death, and thus died for the sins of each of us. Thank him for reconciling us with the Father, having paid the debt of each of us, and for giving us the grace to reconcile with others.