

(English translation)

Rome, May 25, 1981

‘Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” ’ (Mt 9:13).¹

‘... I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

Do you remember when Jesus said these words?

While he was having dinner one day, some publicans and persons of ill-repute came and sat at the table with him. As soon as the Pharisees noticed this, they asked his disciples: ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ Upon hearing this, Jesus replied:

‘Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” ’

Jesus is quoting the prophet Hosea (Hosea 6:6), which shows that he likes the idea it contains.

In fact, it is the principle he himself follows. It expresses the primacy of love over any other commandment, over any other rule or precept.

This is Christianity: Jesus came to say that what God wants from you, in your relationships with others – whether men or women – before anything else is love, and that this will of God has already been proclaimed in Scripture as the words of the prophet show.

Love is the agenda of life for all Christians, the basic law of their actions, the yardstick of their behaviour.

Love must always come before other laws. Indeed, love for others has to become the firm foundation on which a Christian validly puts into practice every other principle.

‘... I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

Jesus wants love, and mercy is one of its expressions.

He wants Christians to live like this, above all else because God is like this.

In Jesus’ eyes, God is, in first place, the Merciful One, the Father who loves everyone and who makes the sun rise and rain fall on the good and the bad.

Because Jesus loves everyone, he is not afraid of associating with sinners, and in this way he reveals to us who God is.

If God, then, is like this, if Jesus is like this, you too must have the same feelings.

‘... I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

‘... and not sacrifice.’

If you do not love your neighbour, your worship will not be pleasing to Jesus. He does not welcome your prayers, your Church-going, your offerings, if they do not flower from a heart at peace with everyone, rich with love towards all.

Do you remember the extremely powerful words of the Sermon on the Mount? ‘So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift’ (Mt 5:23-24).

¹ See Hosea 6:6

These words tell you that the worship most pleasing to God is love of neighbour which should be the basis even of worshipping God.

If you wanted to give a present to your father while you were angry with your brother or your sister (or your brother or your sister were angry with you) what would your father say? 'Make peace between you and then come and give me anything you want.'

But there is more. Love is not only the basis of Christian living. It is also the most direct way of being in communion with God. We are told so by the saints, the witnesses of the Gospel who have gone before us, and it is experienced by Christians who live their faith. If they help their brothers and sisters, above all the needy, their devotion grows, their union with God is strengthened, they feel that a bond exists between them and the Lord, and this is what gives most joy to their lives.

'... I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

How can you live this new Word of Life?

Do not discriminate between the people you are in touch with, do not treat anyone as less important, but offer everyone as much as you can give, imitating God the Father. Patch up minor or major disagreements which are displeasing to heaven and bring bitterness to your life. As Scripture says, do not let the sun set on your anger with anyone (see Eph. 4:26).

If you behave like this, all you do will be pleasing to God and will remain in eternity. Whether you are working or resting, whether you are playing or studying, whether you are with your children or going for a walk with your wife or husband, whether you are praying or making sacrifices, or fulfilling the religious practices of your Christian vocation, everything, everything, everything is raw material for the kingdom of heaven.

Paradise is a house we build here and dwell in there. And we build it with love.

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