

Jesus: Ashes, Spirituality and Hope

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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In the United States of America, a few weeks ago, we began a new process of political campaigns with a view to a succession of the presidency and the powers of the union. It is beginning to become a habit that one of the recurring themes is the view that candidates and parties have of people in a situation of mobility, whom we simply call "migrants". Making promises about what public policies will be implemented to "close the borders" are the most used bait today to try to win a political booty that means popular-electoral acceptance.

Migrants are, therefore, a bargaining chip in this quest to bring out the bad and the worst in citizenship in order to achieve the desired power. Instilling fear in society, under the guise of national security, remains a powerful weapon in the service of the world's imperial powers. It was so in the time and culture of Jesus, and it continues to be so today in a very different latitude.

This is the context in which Lent begins in 2024. The text Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21 inaugurates this Christian celebration and, as a backdrop, we have the fact that Ash Wednesday coincides this year with Valentine's Day. This legendary character, Saint Valentine, was a martyr in the history of the Christian church, he is considered the patron saint of people in love and February 14, his name day, became popular as a date to celebrate love.

The biblical passage that inspires us today, crossed by the "Lord's Prayer" that is not part of the pericope proposed by the lectionary for meditation, is a timely call to prayer. Meditation as a means of pacifying the noises that surround us or that inhabit us.

A Buddhist friend once said to me, "I believe that if all of us instructed our sons and daughters in meditation [prayer], we would be able to eradicate violence in three generations."

The truth is that many people don't know how to appreciate the value of silence. Silence as part of the nourishment of our spiritualities.

Many of us inhabit the cultures of sound. When silence surrounds us, we feel uncomfortable. It's like we're wasting our time because we can't hear anything. We pray, rushing immediately to run over each other with words... eloquent as much as possible, but unnecessary in many cases.

In Matthew's text we see Jesus denouncing "the noise" of religiosity. That which prides itself on giving alms, which shouts fasts, or which recites long prayers in the midst of congregations. The religiosity of the scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees, who in the Gospel

are a fundamental opposition to the spirituality of Jesus, who is content with small gestures and great silent actions.

Jesus even makes a parenthesis to teach the value of prayer with the quality of saying a lot in a short time. Striving for justice for those in need of mercy through the Kingdom. Prayer as a communal act of closeness to God, a word that begs for bread, that asks for the forgiveness of usurious debts, that asks to overcome the temptations of injustice and that advocates to protect people from the actions of the wicked.

In the face of all this, people, instead of worrying about cultivating a spirituality of freedom in God, immerse themselves in a religiosity of boasting and vainglory.

Jesus warns from the beginning: "Beware of doing your righteousness before the people only to be seen by them" (v. 1). Boasting does not go with Jesus' project. This teacher does not require synagogues to meditate with boasting. It needs more of the desert to be tested and strengthened in the midst of the eloquence of silence. For this reason, he recommends praying in secrecy and behind closed doors. He recommends fasting with a "washed face" and in secret.

I grew up in a very Protestant family, and although my environment was never obtuse in terms of different religious practices, in the ecclesiastical community where I was formed Lent was never celebrated and ashes were never placed on the forehead. As if these kinds of celebrations were "non-Christian," it was almost normal for me to refrain, on a certain Wednesday of the year, from having my forehead stained black.

With the passage of time, my biblical and theological training, research and a lot of reading, I have learned to value symbols of faith that are not "copyrighted," that is, that are not the property of this or that expression of Christianity.

Lent as a space of preparation for Holy Week, and Ash Wednesday as its starting point, are an opportunity to positively value Christian humility that has biblical foundations. Recollection as a space of silence and contrition is extremely opportune in the midst of the noise of this world convulsed by so many misfortunes.

Ashes are a biblical symbol that reminds us of a fundamental principle of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity: "dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). In addition, it connects us directly to what we can call a "biblical spirituality of the desert," the 40 years in transit from Egypt to Israel, as well as Jesus' 40 days of fasting before his ministry.

In the midst of the dust of the desert, which is what the liturgical symbol of ashes evokes, both the people of Israel and Jesus himself are forced to ask themselves about the meaning that God can give to their lives. The spiritual questions of the desert are: Who are we? What are we doing here? In these questions, God makes sense... God becomes the experience of

life... God happens! It is then that the people, and Jesus himself, can face life with a vocation and, above all, with the hope that God will be there happening.

Today, in the third decade of the 21st century, the world is experiencing one of the most desolate moments in its history: fratricidal wars, femicides, migrants forced into slave labor, kidnappings, organized crime, disorganized and corrupt "states," electoral campaigns that put migrants as spoils of war, and a long etcetera.

In the midst of all these circumstances, which seem to be commonplace, there is the pressing need to find peace. Unfortunately, those of us who live in urban areas are so used to noise that we become intolerant of silence. On the other hand, rural conglomerates also have a lot of noisy sounds around them, caused by slave labor or by the hunger for food and justice.

That's where Ash Wednesday makes sense, especially if it's a call to humble search for God's voice in the midst of so much noise. The ashes should become an opportunity to revalue silence and make prayer not a rosary of requests and needs, but a time of reflection in which we learn to listen to God's voice.

Perhaps this opportunity to have ashes put on our foreheads is not the time to paint a cross on ourselves, for our commitment to take up the cross every day (Luke 9:23) has nothing to do with announcing to the world that we are very religious, for that is exactly what Jesus denounces in Matthew. Maybe we could paint the letters "DACA" in ashes.

Now, whether we decide to go to a temple to have a cross of ashes placed on our foreheads or whether we choose not to, let us do so with the commitment to follow the faithful path of the cross of Christ, as God's redeeming grace, to remind the world and our people that we wait with hope, not in corrupt authorities, nor in politicians who only come looking for votes, but in the "God of peace, who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead" (Hebrews 13:20) justice and peace with dignity for our peoples.

The legendary character identified as "Saint Valentine" was, according to tradition, a Roman doctor who became a priest and married other Roman soldiers, even though he had been banned by Emperor Claudius "The Gothic". This emperor considered marriage incompatible with a career in arms. St. Valentine "painted his own cross" with the ashes of martyrdom by disobeying imperial authoritarianism for reasons of conscience and solidarity,

May Lent (40 days) that begins today, Ash Wednesday, be an invitation to pray and fast for our world, which needs God to happen in it.