

IF HE LISTENS TO YOU , YOU HAVE GAINED A BROTHER

Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 18,15-20

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

The evangelist Matthew begins his gospel with the affirmation that Jesus is the God with us and concludes his gospel with the assurance of Jesus *“I am with you always, to the end of time.* (Matt. 27, 20) About halfway through, chapter 18, Jesus reaffirms this statement by saying *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”* So Jesus confirms and declares that he is in the midst of his community. And it is precisely for this reason that much of this chapter 18 is against the scandal of disagreements within the community and the need for forgiveness.

The passage that we now read is chapter 18,15-20. Jesus states *“If your brother...”* the word “brother” indicates that it is a community relationship – *“...sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.* it is not the one who offends who must go ask for forgiveness, but it is the offended who must go and try to win back his brother, alone. And here the translation says “Go and warn him”; it is not the warning because that assumes the superiority of who is warning and the inferiority of whom is warned, but the verb is to convince, that is to let your brother know the mistake that he made, if he does not listen to you *“... take one or two others along with you,...”* as witnesses *“ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”* Therefore do not tell anyone, do not publicize this scandal of the lack of forgiveness. *“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”* It does not mean to ignore him but it means that love is one way. In the church community there is love given and received love - we love each other. The gentile and the tax collector love without expecting anything in return, so it is one way love.

And here Jesus makes a solemn declaration *“Truly, I say to you, ...”* so he is sure - using the rabbinical language, he states *“...whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,...”* they are the same expressions that Jesus used for Peter, but in this context they concern forgiveness. What does Jesus want to say? What does the evangelist mean with this expression? Whoever does not forgive denies the forgiveness of God. God's forgiveness is already given, but it becomes operative and effective only when it is transformed and becomes translated into forgiveness towards others. So *“...whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* that is, if you do not forgive, you do not receive forgiveness; those that you forgive you will receive forgiveness. So God's forgiveness is already given, it becomes operative and effective in people when it translates into merciful forgiveness towards others.

And then Jesus, referring to a Hebrew saying where it was stated that when two were reunited in the study of the law the glory of God was present, he says “ *Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask...* ” and here the evangelist uses the Greek verb "symphonic", hence the term "symphony"; what is the symphony? There is the same music score, but every musician, every instrument uses his talent, all that ability he has - the violin is different from the piano - but all together in the unity of the same music score they cause a symphony. So the environment of the Christian community, the community of believers, is that of a symphony: a single score is that of love and the ways of living it are different. Well Jesus assures us that when there is this symphony, whatever is asked of the Father will be granted, why? Because “ *For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.* ” The symphony, that is, the harmony of the community, ensures the presence of the Lord; disagreement, division, lack of forgiveness hides the presence of the Lord. The Lord is always there, only he does not manifest himself . So it is evident that this passage is about forgiveness because , after this teaching of Jesus, Peter, who had understood, will intervene and say “ “*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?*” (v.21) So the context is the scandal of disagreement and forgiveness in the community i san invitation to form a symphony of love.