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OCTOBER 2, 2019

Wednesday of the 26th Week of Ordinary Time

*Memorial of the Holy Guardian Angels*

Neh 2:1-8

Ps 137:1-6

Mt 18:1-5,10

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The two readings of today's liturgy, Neh 2:1-8 and Mt 18:1-5,10, can be understood as fundamental expressions of a missionary spirituality for our time.

Nehemiah, previously introduced as the king's cupbearer (see Neh 1:11b) in the royal Persian court, bears in his heart a living and painful memory of the destruction of Jerusalem (see Neh 1:5-11); it is not a nostalgic patriotism, but a fundamental aspect of biblical prayer at the time of Babylonian exile and post-exile (see Ps 137:5-6). It is consistent with the message about the new exodus from this exile to return to the "land of the fathers" (see Is 40:9-11). It is part of the Lord's plan for his people, using even the authority of a pagan, Cyrus, king of Persia, one of the powerful of the earth at the time (see Ez 1:1-4). Nehemiah understands that in his position at the court of the Persian empire – around December 446 BC, during the reign of Artaxerxes I, almost a century after the edict of Cyrus – his vocation or mission must be to rebuild Jerusalem, in a broad understanding of that expression: to deal with the concrete problems of the Jews who must now rebuild the cultic and administrative community in the province of Judea with its epicenter in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah knows that while in the imperial court he cannot reveal his Jewish identity, because the Persian king might suspect his sorrow over the destruction and abandonment of Jerusalem to be the catalyst of a subversive

movement, a work in support of an ethnic-religious minority within the empire. The king's question to Nehemiah is direct: "What is it, then, that you wish?" (Neh 2:4), as though he is probing the reasons for Nehemiah's sorrow. This Jew in the Persian court is concerned he might say too much: "I prayed to the God of heaven" (Neh 2:4). The book of Proverbs, in fact, tells us: "Plans are made in human hearts, / but from the LORD comes the tongue's response (Prv 16:1). And in light of this faith, Nehemiah is able to ask permission to go to Judea to work to rebuild Jerusalem (see Neh 2:5).

In fact, everything now moves quickly in the way intended by the Lord. The king only asks Nehemiah how much time he needs for his mission in Judea; already his consent is clear (see Neh 2:6). Nehemiah continues in his prudent approach, necessary to carry out of his mission, but now it is the Lord who acts (see Neh 2:8).

This "missionary" acted with prudence in the hostile world in which he lived, but prudence and wisdom would not have been enough without the "guiding hand" of the Lord. He will now have to understand the Palestinian world within which he will have to move to carry out the mission to which the Lord calls him.

The Gospel passage, in which Jesus calls us to become like children, shines light on the depth of the work of conversion that is needed within the Church itself, in order to carry out our own mission. This mission can be spoiled from within the community of Jesus' disciples by the temptations of pride and power dressed up in religious language (see Mt 18:1). In the final lines of the same Gospel, which mention sins that prevent us from following Jesus in his ascent to Jerusalem, the last temptation and the hardest one to resist – after the disorderly use of sexuality (see Mt 19:1-12) and attachment to money (see Mt 19:16-26) – is power, which seems intractable even for the disciples of Jesus (see Mt 20:20-28).

To the spoiling of one's mission by sin, Jesus contrasts a meaningful gesture and a vital commitment: to make oneself small like children (see Mt 18:2-4). Anyone who feels called to mission needs of a profound conversion:

to become like a child. Not like children in the purely human sense. Nehemiah must have a specific and accurate awareness of both the world in which he moves and from which he departs, and the world he feels he must move into. In a similar way, every disciple of Jesus who feels called to a mission must have faith in God and trust fully in God. The missionary disciple must have the same immense trust that children have in their parents, sure of their love and their protection, and therefore confident in the present, that for them it is already the beginning of the future.

It is the same experience that Jesus has as the Son of his Father, fully aware of reality, totally confident and willing to surrender to him. Only in this way, conforming ourselves totally to Jesus, can we who are disciples approach the mission to which we are called. The Christian who has really become like a child, in the sense understood by Jesus, learns by experience that the fruitfulness of his mission is in the hands of the One who raised Christ from death and who sends him. Woe to that Christian community that considers such faith insignificant, despising or dismissing it: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father” (Mt 18:10).

Becoming like a child gives the missionary disciple the form of her relationship with Jesus, the Master and Lord. In him, the disciple discovers her filial vocation as a child of the Father and her free obedience as the fruit of belonging in faith and mission. As a son or daughter in the Son, every disciple is missionary because she is sent to proclaim good news, supported and accompanied by angels, divine messengers who keep her open to contemplation as the foundation of mission and to the challenges of the world to which she offers witness. Like the guardian angel to whom each of us is entrusted, the child disciple always sees in Jesus the face of the Father to discover always and in anyone the face of a brother, the existence of a sister, to love and to save.