

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

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## **Jesus, a man of His time and space, shows us our true and full humanity**

### **Lectio n° 3 To descend**

#### **Introduction**

In order to meet Jesus in His humanity, we may be helped by the verb 'to descend'. We are used to regarding God as the One who "dwells above", in the heavens... and our commitment to put the Gospel into practice and our spiritual life in general consist in making efforts to raise ourselves above our humanity, that we deem to be 'material', 'sinful', weak, fragile, prone to falling... and 'conversion' is a synonym of changing our lives: from human life to the divine one, from the imperfect to the perfect one.

We could go on with further definitions to describe our spiritual and religious commitment, but that would be a paradox. While God is descending in our flesh, we would go up by trying to get rid of our flesh, thus meeting Him half way, going in the opposite direction...

Our ways and means of encountering Him are: devotions, religious feelings, prayers, charity, alms, Bible reading, retreats, religious exercises... Of course all these things are good and must be done, but do they proceed in the same direction as the one chosen by our God? When we have an appointment with someone, shall we go to the appointed place or to some other place which is convenient for us?

God would like to meet us in our own reality, where we dwell, where we live our everyday lives. He would like to find us in our own 'space' – our own humanity – which we despise and try to flee from, as we think it is not apt as a place of meeting.

Let us change our direction then, or, better, let us convert ourselves, which involves making a U turn and walking in the opposite direction, against the traffic, so that we may meet God: He is descending towards us, always!

**Let us invoke the Holy Spirit:  
Our God, Father of Light,  
You sent Your Word into the world  
through the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms,  
and in the last days You willed**

that Your very Son,  
the Eternal Verb dwelling with You,  
should make known to us You,  
the one and only true God.  
Pour over us Your Holy Spirit,  
so that He may give us a heart  
able to listen,  
that He may open our eyes  
and lead us to the full truth.  
We beseech You  
through Christ our Lord,  
blessed now and for ever.  
Amen.  
(Community of Bose)

## **1. Lectio** (to read the Word / to listen to it)

### **Mark 1:9-13**

#### 1. The immersion Mk 1:9

*“It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John.”*

#### 2. The Dove and the Voice Mk 1:10-11

*“And at once, as He was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him. And a voice came from Heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You.’”*

#### 3. The Spirit and the desert Mk 1:12-13

*“And at once the Spirit drove Him into the desert, and He remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after Him.”*

- Let us read the text more than once, slowly and making a pause each time...
- Let us go into the text's depths.

All four Gospels testify that Jesus left Galilee to go to a certain John who, preaching penitence and conversion, was getting the attention of all the people: great multitudes gathered around him at the springs of the Jordan. Both John's behaviour and speech were harsh. He did not gather people in the Temple, the holiest place of all where all the major religious festivals were celebrated yearly according to tradition. One cannot deny that he denounced the hypocrisy of the means of salvation existing at the time; like Elijah, Hosea or Jeremiah, he would like to bring back the people into the desert, in a kind of 'cultural regression', so that they could observe the Covenant with God with a cleansed and purified soul. His urge could not stand any delay. John cared for an utter and radical conversion

(in Greek, ‘metanoia’; in Hebrew, ‘teshuvah’). That conversion found expression through a new gesture that, as a symbolic act, was meant to confirm in their commitment all those who were listening to him and following him: a full immersion in the waters of the Jordan, that is, baptism.

In the brief passage we are dealing with, we can highlight three different steps that characterize Jesus’ descent.

### 1. The immersion Mk 1:9

“It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John.”

The chronological incipit (“It was at this time”) gives the whole passage an Old Testament feel, as that phrase occurs many times there. Here its aim is to provide a temporal context to the report, while leaving it rather indefinite and open to different interpretations.

This is the first time that Jesus, the protagonist, comes to the fore in St Mark’s Gospel. He is identified as the Nazarene. It is interesting to point out that Nazareth – like many other Palestinian villages – is never mentioned in the Old Testament. The River Jordan, compared to all the other rivers of the earth, is ‘special’ thanks to two features:

- it is the lowest of all rivers, going down 500 metres below sea level. In fact, its name ‘Yarden’ means ‘descending’ (from the verb ‘yarad’, ‘to go down’);
- it is unique also as far as the history of salvation is concerned: it is the historical border through which the people of Israel, led by Joshua, entered the Land promised to the forefathers (cf Jos 3).

All those who are willing to be baptized in the Jordan must therefore “descend”. They must go down below the deepest water-table existing on earth. And they must also go back to the border which their forefathers crossed to reach the promised land, and cross it with a renewed soul. Thus they receive baptism as ‘neophytes’, open to all that pertains to God. St John’s attitude is in fact coupled with a huge hope: that the new times are coming. God Himself is ready to visit His people: this is a menace for all those who practice injustice, but a liberation for all those who are genuinely converted.

Who answered that appeal, then? People of all sorts... presumably with the exception of Jerusalem’s priestly aristocracy. The Gospels speak of “multitudes”, “publicans” and “sinners”, “prostitutes”, “the common people” (cf Lk 3:10-13; 7:29-30; Mt 21:31-32). Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes probably went to see John too, but with the aim more of spying him and controlling what was happening there than of being baptized (cf Mt 3:7; 21:32; Jn 1:19, 24; 3:25; 5:33-35). Jesus joined that multitude and asked John to baptize him too.

This is a point we must ponder on. Jesus’ first public act is an act of humility: He descended to the lowest water of the earth, and did not disdain to mix himself with a multitude of men and women confessing that they were sinners.

### 2. The Dove and the Voice Mk 1:10-11

“And at once, as He was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him. And a voice came from Heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You.’”

“And at once” (Gr. ‘euthys’) is an adverb, occurring in St Mark’s Gospel at least 41 times. By this adverb he intends to link baptism to the ensuing scene.

Jesus comes up out of the water: this action reminds us of what happened to the people when they came out of the Red Sea, and they were free (cf Ps 114). However, when Jesus comes out of the water the point of view of the narration shifts from the outside to the inside. In fact, the text says that “Jesus saw...”

Now the evangelist makes us see what the protagonist did indeed see. In addition to that, he makes use of a phrase that refers us to Ezekiel’s prophetic experience. But what does Jesus see? “The heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him...” (Mk 1:10) Here we should take into consideration two elements:

- “the heavens torn apart”: here St Mark highlights something that is definitive. By Jesus’ descent the heavens are torn apart and cannot be mended. Here resounds “the veil of the Sanctuary torn in two from top to bottom” (Mk 15:38) when Jesus died on the cross. “To tear the heavens” is a phrase occurring in the Old Testament only once, in Isaiah 63:19.

- “the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him”: in Biblical literature the dove is mentioned at the Flood (cf Gn 8:6-12); in the Song of Song, as a symbol of the beloved (cf Sg 2:14; 5:2; 6:9); when Israel goes back to its country after the exile (cf Is 60:8; Hos 11:11). “He saw... the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him”, literally, “in Him”: this detail is worthy of note, because it is of paramount importance. In fact, in those days someone believed that the Spirit had gone back to the Heavenly Sanctuary; that He was no more present and working among the people. The phrase “Holy Spirit” is more complex than a mere noun preceded by an adjective: ‘Ruach ha-qodesh’ means ‘the Spirit of the Sanctuary’. It was common belief at the time that the Temple of Jerusalem, profaned by Pompeus, had not been re-consecrated properly; consequently, it could not contain the ‘Shekinah’ (God’s ‘indwelling’) and the Spirit of the Sanctuary was not in its middle. St Mark, therefore, wants to relate an unheard-of event: when the heavens are torn and the Spirit descends, God’s Presence (Shekinah, Ruach ha-qodesh, the Holy Spirit) can dwell in Jesus’ person, in Jesus’ humanity.

At last, after the ‘visual’ moment, comes the ‘hearing’ moment of line 11: “And a voice came from Heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You.’”

In all theophanic manifestations, the voice is always the interpreter of the vision. The Voice presents Himself indirectly. By stating, “You are my Son”, He is in fact saying that He is His Father. This Voice addresses Jesus alone and reveals who He is:

- “my Son, the Beloved”: this phrase is related to Isaac in Gn 22, when he is about to be sacrificed on Mt Moriah, three times deemed to be the “beloved son”. Jesus is God’s Isaac and He must be ready to be sacrificed, exactly like Abraham’s Isaac. There is also a reference to Psalm 2:7, where the Messiah’s special relation with God is presented: “He said to me, ‘You are my son, today have I fathered you’”.
- “my favour rests on You”: here there is a reference to Is 42:1: “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights”.

These appellatives are therefore very important, not only to understand what His identity is, but also His mission: it is to Jesus that the Father entrusts the fulfilment of His messianic plan.

### 3. The Spirit and the desert Mk 1:12-13

“And at once the Spirit drove Him into the desert, and He remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after Him.”

The phrase “And at once” (Gr., ‘euthys’), as above, is the link between the scene that has just ended and the new one, where the Holy Spirit, already descended on Him, drives Him into the desert. St Mark makes use of the verb ‘ekballo’, which denotes very powerful actions, such as driving away devils. And the use of the present tense (in the Greek text) makes the action lively. According to St Mark, the point of Jesus’ going into the desert is not just to be tempted: the setting provides an additional meaning to Jesus’ experience. The desert is the place of trial (cf Dt 8:2), but also of purification and of comprehension of one’s own identity. To the People of God, the desert was the place set in between the furnace of Egypt and the Promised Land; and the time spent in the desert was interpreted as the time of betrothal (cf Hos 2:16, or Jr), or as the time of trial or as the time spent by a father upbringing his son (cf Dt 8:2-5). The desert is also the uninhabited place towards which “the goat on which the lot ‘For Azazel’ has fallen” is driven on the Day of Expiation (Kippur) (cf Lv 16:10).

To Jesus, the desert is the place where He can put to the test His messianic identity as well as His obedience to God.

With respect to the other synoptic gospels, here the details of Jesus’ stay in the desert are totally new: “He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after Him.” We find the wild animals in the OT as a sign of the divine Judgement or punishment (for instance in Is 13:21; 18:6; 56:9; Jr 7:33; 12:9; 16:4; Ezk 32:4; 34:5; Hos 2:14). But the Messiah will be able “to play over the den of the adder” or “to put his hand into the viper’s lair” (Is 11:8). The verb ‘to be’ used by St Mark has a durative quality, conferred on it by the use of the imperfect tense.

By overcoming Satan, Jesus restores the primitive peace (‘shalom’) existing between creation and its Creator. A proof of this restored communion between Heaven and earth is the presence of the angels who “looked after Him”.

## **2. Meditatio** (to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

- After reading the text, let the Word resound in our hearts... We will find out that our own humanity is indeed the place where Jesus Christ has descended, as He was born in our flesh.

## **3. Oratio** (to pray the Word / to repeat it)

O Christ, You underwent baptism,  
You raised humankind fallen into death,  
You re-opened the heavens that Adam closed.

O Christ, when You appeared the Jordan turned back,  
the clouds made their voice resound,  
the heavens opened above You, Son of Man.

O Christ, the Spirit gives witness to You,  
He appears above You like a dove,  
the voice of the Father confesses that You are the Son of God.

O Christ, by Your baptism in the waters of the Jordan  
You took upon Yourself and cancelled the sin of the world,  
You shared our lot, Servant of the Lord.

O Christ, You freed us from the slavery of sin,  
You vanquished our tempter  
and made him fall down from Heaven as a thunderbolt.

We contemplate the mystery of the Holy Trinity:  
the Father reveals His beloved Son,  
the Holy Spirit confirms Him and gives Him power.  
(Monastery of Bose, Daily Prayer)

## **4. Contemplatio** (to contemplate the Word / silence)

- In silence... we turn our inner sight to the One who spoke to us in the Beloved Son. May we be filled with gratitude, as we have been reached there, in the depth, in the Sheol of our humanity which may be at times wounded, hit and humiliated...

## **5. Collatio** **(to share the Word)**

- In order for the Word to be like yeast and become incarnate in our very lives, let us share it with the Sisters...

### **What RM's Rule of Life says**

4

Each of us will fulfil her consecration in her own environment, doing an ordinary job, as ordinary people do.

“God would like to meet us in our own reality, where we dwell, where we live our everyday lives.”

57

By gaining a progressive knowledge of your being in relation to God and to others, (...) you shall strive to reach that balance which will allow you to be increasingly aware when responding to God's calling. Thus you will be able to live your consecration in all serenity...

“He would like to find us in our own ‘space’ – our own humanity – which we despise and try to flee from, as we think it is not apt as a place of meeting.”

61

By faithfully carrying out our daily obligations we make our vocation concrete. You shall strive to live constantly a life of faith: prayer and work will thus become an expression of your communion with Christ...

“Let us change our direction then, or, better, let us convert ourselves, which involves making a U turn and walking in the opposite direction, against the traffic, so that we may meet God: He is descending towards us, always!”