

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

Lectio n° 5 Under the table

Introduction

Israel's experience of faith has always been founded on the idea that God cares for man: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians..." (Ex 3:7-8)

Full of love and faithfulness, God's gaze lingers on each and every of His creatures, and on each of the first six days of creation He always repeats: "God saw that it was good". And at the end He concludes: "God saw all He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Gn 1:31)

Exactly as we men do, Jesus lives in the dimension of the senses. Where does His gaze come from? Where does His human gaze come from? Of course, we can say that it comes from His being God's Son, come down to earth in order to reveal the face of the Father. Jesus' gaze is God's very gaze, but it is also man's gaze: we can say that – like any other man – He was born and lived in a precise context, in definite circumstances, in a particular time and place, with a particular lifestyle. His life experience modelled His gaze. The gaze of each of us is in fact always influenced by the environment where we live and by its culture; the gaze lets all of life's experiences come to the fore, as well as all the inner life and all the love that one has received or has not received.

Then, where does Jesus' gaze come from? He was born at Bethlehem, but lived at Nazareth, in a context characterized by poverty. Thanks to His coming from a family of craftsmen, from a poor village of Galilee, He came into contact with the concrete problems of human life, with its natural rhythms and work schedules. Building up from this perspective, Jesus was able to discern "the great in the little", and to attune His gaze to God's one. He met the poor and the little of His land, men and women in their daily labours. His gaze embarked on a journey. We know from the gospels that Jesus left His home and, after His baptism, He started preaching. From that moment onwards, He would always be travelling, a journeying man, and walking would be His constant lifestyle. This is a very important factor, because we can draw from it that the point of view of Jesus'

human gaze on the surrounding reality was always changing, incessantly moving. Therefore, Jesus' gaze was drawn to the concrete life of man and, in particular, of those He met or lived with, be they single persons, a crowd, situations or events. Let us enter then into His gaze, that looks at man not from the dizzy divine heights but from the lowliness of little men, from the same dimension from which the Father called Mary, the poor woman from Nazareth, to become the Mother of the Son Jesus Christ.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit! Come!
Come, true light!
Come, eternal life!
Come, hidden mystery!
Come, unfathomable treasure!
Come, ineffable reality!
Come, inconceivable hypostasis!
Come, endless delight!
Come, true and fervent expectation of all those who will be saved!
Come, rising of those who lie down!
Come, resurrection of the dead!
Come, powerful One, who always fulfil, re-create and transform everything by Your will alone!
Come, invisible One and totally intangible and impalpable!
Come, You who always remain still, but at the same time move all Your Being all the time and come to us who lie in Hades, You who are above all heavens.
Come, name which we desire and celebrate, even though we are unable to find the words to say who You are, as it is completely impossible for us to know You as You really are.
Come, eternal joy!
Come, unfading crown of glory!
Come, purple robe of the great God and our King!
Come, crystal sash studded with precious stones!
Come, inaccessible sandal!
Come, true finger of the King, purple and sovereign! / right hand
Come, You whom my wretched soul has desired and does desire!
(...)
Come, You who have become Yourself desire in me, who have made me desire You, absolutely inaccessible One!
Come, my breath and life!
Come, consolation of my humble soul!
Come, my joy, my glory, and my endless delight!
(St Symeon the New Theologian)

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

Mark 7:24-30

24 He left that place and set out for the territory of Tyre. There He went into a house and did not want anyone to know He was there; but He could not pass unrecognised.

25 At once a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him and came and fell at His feet. 26 Now this woman was a gentile, by birth a Syro-Phoenician, and she begged Him to drive the devil out of her daughter. 27 And He said to her, 'The children should be fed first, because it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs.' 28 But she spoke up, 'Ah yes, sir,' she replied, 'but little dogs under the table eat the scraps from the children.' 29 And He said to her, 'For saying this you may go home happy; the devil has gone out of your daughter.' 30 So she went off home and found the child lying on the bed and the devil gone.

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

24 He left that place and set out for the territory of Tyre. There He went into a house and did not want anyone to know He was there; but He could not pass unrecognised.

Jesus goes to a pagan territory, ie to the region of Tyre. He has just crossed the Jewish border to enter a pagan territory. This geographical detail highlights that Jesus' gaze is set also on foreigners, on the heathen, on those who are not regarded as worthy of attention.

Jesus makes this move, but with discretion. "He did not want anyone to know..." The evangelist does not specify why, but he adds that, in spite of all His precautions, "He could not pass unrecognised". However, Jesus goes forward: He enters a house. This is a violation of the Law: He was a Jew and he should not have entered a heathen house!

25 At once a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him and came and fell at His feet. 26 Now this woman was a gentile, by birth a Syro-Phoenician, and she begged Him to drive the devil out of her daughter.

Jesus' discretion is violated by a woman worrying about her little daughter. Now, with this verse, the narration shifts from the external perspective to the internal one of the woman who, having heard about Him, rushed to Him and "fell at His feet". Then the evangelist underlines the fact that this woman was a gentile, that is, that she spoke Greek, and that she was "by birth a Syro-Phoenician", as if he wanted to stress that Jesus was in heathen territory and that the woman herself was a heathen. The woman's prayer is expressed with a verb in the imperfect tense: "she begged" ('erota'), as if to stress the insistence with which she begged Jesus to perform an exorcism on her daughter ('ekballo ton daimonion'). In fact,

her way of addressing Jesus shows that she utterly believed that He could help her.

27 And He said to her, 'The children should be fed first, because it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs.' 28 But she spoke up, 'Ah yes, sir,' she replied, 'but little dogs under the table eat the scraps from the children.'

Jesus' answer sounds like a negative response that leaves us readers perplexed, given that He may seem to us indifferent: "The children should be fed first, because it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs" (7:27). The adverb 'proton', 'first', expresses a temporal priority: the bread should be first given to the children. In order to understand this dialogue, we must pay attention to the terms used to denote the 'children'. In the Greek text we find two different terms, with two different meanings. The term 'téknon' that Jesus utters twice comes from the root 'tiktein', which means 'to generate'. These are the children of a family. On the contrary, the term 'paidion' used twice, by both the woman and the narrator, is a diminutive of 'pais', 'child', highlighting the height or the little age of the child as opposed to grown ups'. The difference between these two terms is important because it sets Jesus within the context of a family meal, defending the rights of the children of the family. Of course, from this point of view, it is not fair to throw the children's food to the little dogs. The Syro-Phoenician woman, on the contrary, by her answer (7:28) takes Jesus "under the table", inviting Him to take into consideration the little dogs' situation. Little dogs do not complain about what the children are eating. The question here is not whether it is fair for the food to be thrown to the little dogs, but simply that the scraps can be eaten. It is interesting to note how the dimension of lowliness makes one single group out of different realities (little dogs, the little daughter, scraps). Now the point is not that some people should feel full up, but rather that everybody has something to eat. Thus, the temporal priority is abolished. The spatial distance remains, though: it does not prevent little dogs to be fed, but they cannot take the place and the food of children.

29 And He said to her, 'For saying this you may go home happy; the devil has gone out of your daughter.' 30 So she went off home and found the child lying on the bed and the devil gone.

The woman's reply seduces Jesus, who intervenes and complies to her request: the little child is freed. Here the move of the devil is just the opposite of what we found in verse 25: from the inside to outside. All this happens not thanks to the woman's faith, but to her words.

The setting where this liberation takes place is not defined by a gesture or by an exorcism formula on Jesus' part, but is a place lower than lowliness itself: "under the table"! Jesus extends and enlarges His gaze beyond the human reach, up to the extreme borders of humanity.

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

- After reading the text, let the Word resound in our hearts... Let us welcome that gaze that penetrates into the very core of our life, going down to the hidden depths of our being...

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

“We would like to see that gaze
that passes through the wall of the chest and the flesh of the heart
and heals
when it wounds by its disdain
and makes someone bleed
when it is full of tenderness...
You know how much Your gaze
and also Your Word are needed
in these times.
You very well know that Your gaze
can upturn and change our souls.”
[Giovanni Papini, ‘History of Jesus Christ’ (1921)]

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...