

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

Lectio n° 5 An authoritative word

Introduction

How does Jesus speak? At the beginning of this course I said that Jesus talks about what He hears from the Father: “What I declare to the world I have learnt from Him” (Jn 8:26). Jesus speaks as He is the spokesman of the Father: He speaks by His being a man, by His whole life, by His whole experience. By His words and deeds He reveals what the Father sent Him to say, with ‘authority’ (‘exousia’) and benevolence at the same time. His revelation comes about either through veiled teaching (parables) or through the immediate language of miracles, either through discussions or through silence; but, in any case, as truth which does not originate from philosophy but from being faithful to the Father’s face. Jesus’ way of speaking is transparent, faithfully communicating and incarnating the God of Life: He is the One who tells the truth as He has learnt it from God (cf Jn 8:40). He is the One who calls His disciples “friends”, “no longer servants”, because He has made known to them everything He has learnt from the Father (cf Jn 15:15). This is extremely relevant, given that He communicates things which are of vital importance to man’s life; He communicates the good news that we are the object of God’s love, that we can live as children...

However, not only what He says is important, but also the way He says it. He does not just speak, He is THE Word, the ultimate communication on God’s part, ultimately referring to Him. His word is not just made of sounds but also of the events of His life; it is not just a human word but a human being become utter communication, communication of God’s very life.

Those are the reasons why, when we deal with Jesus’ way of speaking, we must take into consideration not only the contents of His speeches but also His way of speaking, talking to our own humanity. And consequently, we must not just imitate Him by repeating His sentences, but also grasp our vocation as communicators and givers of life. We must make His pedagogy and benevolence our own, as well as His simplicity and ‘parresia’, His referring to the very essence of Scripture and His poignancy, letting ourselves be thoroughly guided by the Spirit, so that the Spirit of the Father may be speaking in us (cf Mt 10:20).

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

Among the Synoptic Gospels, St Mark's is the one that describes Jesus' humanity more lively. At the back of the whole narration lies the question, 'Who is He?'; and Jesus reveals His and the Father's Self in a progressive way, not by speeches as in St Matthew's or St John's gospels, but by His words and deeds. In fact, St Mark is writing his gospel for those who are novel to the faith, for the catechumens, so that they may be helped to progressively acquire the faith in Jesus. The basic point is to become Jesus' disciples. One may become a disciple of Jesus by sharing His experience, by establishing a deep relation with Him. A disciple follows Jesus in order to learn His way of speaking, His way of being.

In the text of this Lectio St Mark highlights exactly Jesus' way of speaking, a way that amazes men and that produces an effect, being accompanied by an incisive action. His words and deeds reveal the Good News, ie Himself.

By the power of the Word

If we want to pray
that the Kingdom of God may come down on us,
we must beg Him by the power of the Word:
that I may be separated from corruption;
that I may be freed from death;
that I may be unbound from the chains of error;
that death may never reign over me;
that the tyranny of evil may be powerless over me;
that the adversary may never rule over me,
by making me prisoner of sin;
but that Your Kingdom may come over me
so that all the passions that rule and lord over me
may flee from me.
As smoke dissolves into this air,
thus they will dissolve;
as wax melts next to a fire,
thus they will perish.
When the Kingdom of God is in our midst,
all the things that rule over us
will be condemned to vanish.
(St Gregory of Nyssa)

Mark 1:21-28

21 They went as far as Capernaum, and at once on the Sabbath He went into the synagogue and began to teach. 22 And His teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, He taught them with authority.

23 And at once in their synagogue there was a man with an unclean spirit, and he shouted, 24 'What do You want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are: the Holy One of God.' 25 But Jesus rebuked it saying, 'Be quiet! Come out of him!' 26 And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. 27 The people were so astonished that they started asking one another what it all meant, saying, 'Here is a teaching that is new, and with authority behind it: He gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey Him.' 28 And His reputation at once spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

Let us analyze the text:

- a) 21a, Introduction
- b) 21-22, Teaching-word
- c) 23-26, Reaction of the man and Jesus' deed
- d) 27-28, Questions and conclusion

We are in the first part (1:14-3:6) of the first section (1:14-8:26) of St Mark's Gospel. The prologue ("The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, Son of God") summarizes that the Good News is Jesus Himself, that Jesus that, after being baptized in the River Jordan, is "at once" driven into the desert.

He is God's Good News (1:14). God has taken the initiative, it is now the fullness of time ('peplerotai') and God has come down into history. The event of salvation is now, "at once" (this phrase is typical of Mark's), it is fulfilled now in the present events. One should change his mentality and believe the Good News, establish a relation with Jesus. These very few notes of ours are enough to show, as in a filigree, the dynamics of what happens in the synagogue of Capernaum.

a) 21a, Introduction

Jesus enters Capernaum. This immediately follows the calling of Simon and Andrew, of James and John: "Come after me..." (1:17). Jesus is no longer on His own: "They went as far as Capernaum". The earlier relationships of discipleship have already been established; His first disciples are already with Him, and are walking with Him.

The day spent in Capernaum will be topical, containing in itself "at once" the meanings of the following events, gradually shown later on in the gospel: teachings, healings, forgiveness.

Jesus enters the synagogue where, after reading a passage from Moses' Torah and a verse from the prophets, any grown-up could stand up and speak, making a comment to the texts. As a rule, the comment should refer to preceding authoritative explanations, down to Moses' own. Jesus stands up and starts to teach. However, the evangelist does not say what Jesus taught... In fact, in the place of the town where men meet to listen to the Word of God, a new way of speaking can be heard.

b) 21-22, Teaching-word

We do not know the contents of Jesus' teaching, but St Mark relates that they were amazed. The Greek term is 'exeplessonto', which denotes utter amazement,

beyond any limits. The text specifies that this amazement does not derive from what He says or because He teaches something new, but from the way Jesus speaks: “with authority”, with ‘exousia’.

This term has pride of place in the whole first section (1:22,27; 2:10); it occurs in five occasions, ie disputes, and its meaning is explained further and further. The five disputes with scribes (2:1-12; 2:13-17), Farisees (2:18-22; 2:23-27; 3:1-6) and Herodians (3:1-6) make us understand what His teaching was about. And we must conclude that His authority had to do with the interpretation of the Mosaic Law. But what was Jesus’ way of speaking? What is the meaning of “unlike the scribes, He taught them with authority”?

The scribes were lay men who, after a life devoted to the study of Scripture, received the transmission of the spirit of Moses, of the prophetic spirit, by the imposition of the hands. Their authority was so great that the Talmud states that their decisions and words were even superior to the Torah.

People realized that there was something different in Jesus. His words communicated something that did not come to Him from outside, that He had learnt by heart, but that was indeed His own. He spoke with authority, He knew what He was talking about... They felt that He was communicating truth, what He knew... This is the basis: ‘to communicate’, ‘to establish a relationship’. He was genuine, He was Himself because He was in an extremely close relationship with the Father and transmitted the authentic core of His will. Later on Jesus will say: “You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions’ (Mk 7:8).

Here we do not find artificial interpretations, human precepts, legal quibbles, but the ‘exousia’, the power of a genuine word that is the answer to the questions of man’s heart, an answer man hopes for even though he does not know it yet.

Jesus’ word is powerful because it corresponds to the original word that God the Creator put into man’s heart, that word that God gave for man’s life to be fulfilled. And this correspondence generates amazement.

Jesus’ word never goes against man. On the contrary, it highlights what can make men and women more and more genuine.

c) 23-26, Reaction of the man; and Jesus’ deed

And now we can understand why St Mark deals with a man with an unclean spirit, a rebel spirit, a spirit which is opposed to the God of life, a spirit who rebels against Jesus’ presence and words which he perceives as a menace because it goes against that part of man’s life which is ‘non-life’. And he rebels “at once”. There seems to be an acceleration taking place in time, but it is due to the immediacy of the fullness of time which originates from the powerful presence of Jesus of Nazareth. His words and gestures operate.

In this second moment the evangelist highlights the authority of the word which fulfils what it says. We can infer from the events, then, that Jesus’ authority operates a cut, and those listening to Him become able to discern in their own souls between good and evil. And then they answer Him, they react.

“What do You want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” is the translation of the words the unclean spirit shouts, similar to those of Mk 5:8. In both cases, they are similar to the formula for a covenant used in the Semitic world.

“Us”: how many of them are there? The words uttered by the Man called Jesus of Nazareth (the unclean spirit stresses the word “Nazareth”) are there to break the

covenant between the unclean spirit and man: man has to change mentality, he has to 'metanoiete' (Mk 1:15) to respond to the approaching Kingdom of God (ie, Jesus Himself), as Jesus proclaimed from the very beginning of His ministry.

His words are there to destroy the unclean spirit, by showing man's inner division. His words are an accusation and reveal what is deadly within that man.

As the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, "the word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two edged sword: it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow; it can pass judgement on secret emotions and thoughts." (4:12) It gets rid of lies and substitutes them with truth.

Jesus was a man with a home (Nazareth) and relatives, not a Messiah similar to Melchizedek (who in popular view had "no father, mother or ancestry", Heb 7:3); He was the Holy One of God who entered time and became man, who was tempted in the desert (described by St Mark as a reconciliation of man with his true being, cf 1:13b). Jesus' very humanity is the condition by which now Jesus' word breaks the covenant with and destroys all that has to do with 'non-life', with death, with what is unclean within man. Thanks to His human condition which underwent temptation and won, the authority of Jesus' word is not only revelatory but can also rebuke what is contrary to life by saying, "Be quiet!"

To change mentality and to establish a relationship with Jesus made a great trouble come to the fore: His word accused, revealed, cut, freed. In this genuine relationship the way of believing changes too. Not just believing who Jesus is (the unclean spirit knew that exactly), or what the catechism says, but experiencing the power of the relationship, of the new and genuine covenant between Him and man, getting rid of all false and damaging relationships. One becomes free to come to terms with Jesus and His word. Maybe that man was the only one that let himself be laid bare in that synagogue, the only one who let himself be truly questioned by Jesus' teaching.

d) 27-28, Questions and conclusion

"The people were so astonished that they started asking one another what it all meant, saying, 'Here is a teaching that is new, and with authority behind it: He gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey Him.'"

It is interesting to point out that the term used here is 'kaine', 'new', 'of a superior quality', not 'neoscio', 'new', 'more recent'. Authority now is of a superior quality: the Law is no longer 'dead' and focussed on minor details, but life-giving according to God's will, as in Dt 5:29, 33. What happens when they hear Jesus' word, the liberation from uncleanness to lead a renewed life, is the deep meaning of the five disputes on the Law that we find up to Chapter 3:6. The unclean spirit's obedience is contrasted with the opposition of scribes, Pharisees and Herodians, all trying to put Jesus to death. All those are fighting against the word of life, and trying to put life to death. It is as if the emblematic and paradigmatic fact of the unclean spirit's rebellion against Jesus were re-enacted in those episodes, showing resistance to change, opposition to the one and only authentic life-giving Word, breaking up the man-made rules suffocating the God-given Law.

As “His reputation spread everywhere”, we register the opposition of those who regarded themselves as the owners of the Word, of men’s happiness, of the path of life.

Throughout St Mark’s Gospel, the reader will be called to identify how the testing in the desert (the evangelist makes use of the present perfect tense in order to denote a lasting situation) will be re-enacted in a veiled way in different situations.

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

- How do we speak? How do we communicate? Do we start from ‘theories’ or from our own experience of a Life-giving God? From the experience of a ‘stale’ God? From a God of ready-made sentences or from an experience of a relationship?

- Perhaps the novelty and the authority that are presented to us do not have to do with theological ideas or with authoritarianism, but with authenticity, with the quest for truth within ourselves, with paths of healing... so that we do not let come to the fore self-absorbed words, but we rather communicate that Word that has reached us and that is renewing us.

- We are trying to convert ourselves, to change our mentality (I am not speaking of course of rationality, but of our way of feeling and understanding life, especially as an openness and readiness to establish relationships according to our own vocation, exactly as women, which is part of our identity). We are in between the Word that reaches us, that “operates”, that reveals and frees, and the word that we are called to give to others: in between those two poles there are all our affective world, our own closeness to others, but also our own longing for believing in a feminine way, of growing trusting in the Good News made man, in Jesus of Nazareth, by our own specificity of being women.

- However, first of all we must identify the ‘quid’, the ‘it’, appealing to us in our own ‘synagogue’. In the light of nn° 16 and 22 of our Rule of Life I quote a passage by Antony Bloom. I think it may help us grow in authenticity when we are confronted by the Word of God, and become the feminine face of the history of salvation.

“When we read the Scripture in all honesty, we must acknowledge that certain passages seem to be ‘not relevant’. We are ready to agree with God when there are no reasons to disagree. We may approve this or that order, this or that act, given that they have nothing to do with us, or so we believe.

We do not like other passages at all, if we dared say NO to the Lord. We should get the habit of taking note very carefully of those passages. They are the ‘measure’ of our distance from God, as well as of the distance between what we are and what we could potentially become. In fact, the

gospel is not a series of external commands, but a whole gallery of inner pictures. And each time we say no to the gospel, we refuse to be persons in the fullest meaning of the term.”

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

O God of the unforeseen,
make me able not to fear the unforeseen,
the unusual, the unplanned,
because You were indeed all that
and hurt the hearts of men
by You utter novelty.
Make my heart melt
so that I may be astonished as well as astonish others
by my novelty of thought,
novelty of life,
creativity of love,
promptness to fight against evil.
Please make me similar to You as much as I can,
O God of the unforeseen,
who in Your Son
overcame a pointless and nonsensical world.
Please make me an image and instrument
of Your Good News.
(Leon Bloy)

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

In the silence of our souls, let us lay ourselves bare in all trust in front of that Presence enlightening us to the very depths of our soul, purifying our darkness, making us share in communion, making us shine as women.

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

Let us share the Word, passing on to others the experience of what it revealed and changed in us, especially what looked stale and old in us. Let us try to communicate all that in a genuine way, and let us give life to others.