

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

**Lectio n° 6
To relate: life's richness**

Introduction

The 'parable' makes use of simple but clever language, humble and at the same time appealing, originating from daily life, from a shared experience, but at the same time making people ponder a specific issue in an unusual way.

This language prompts those who hear it either to agree or disagree, because by now they are involved in the story, so to speak. This language opens up people to a 'beyond'.

We could say that all our life is just a big parable, through which – in fact through its simple and accessible comparisons – we are accompanied towards God's ineffable reality. This simple reality reveals to us a bigger reality, because the Infinite One is hidden in little things. How wonderful would it be if one could discern what occurs to him in his lifetime! How wonderful would it be if one could let himself be pushed forward and see beyond what is down-to-earth!

Jesus' language made Heaven and earth closer: He, the inaccessible One, did not disdain to make use of the everyday life stories of a shepherd who loses his sheep, of a woman who loses a coin, of a kingdom as little as a mustard seed.

Jesus presented Himself like that, He revealed the Kingdom of God, He advised us on how to relate to the Father, how we should keep vigil, how we should love our brothers and sisters, He told us about God's mercy, He foretold His disciples about His death.

How can we – women of 2020 – find words not distant from our own humanity, from our own times, but at the same time words opening people up to God's 'beyondness'?

Let us be moved by Jesus' language, so that we can – in our turn – relate about the path of true liberty and dignity, where the Father is ever waiting for us and the Son turned the Father's quest for man into real flesh and blood.

Let us be led by the Holy Spirit

Who are You, sweet Light pouring down over me

and making bright the night of my heart?
You are leading me like a mother's hand.
But if You let me go, I would not be able to advance,
not more than one single step.
You are the space that surrounds my being,
in which my being hides.
If you abandon me,
I will fall into the abyss of nothingness,
from which You called me to being.
You are closer to me than my self,
You are deeper in me than my inner self.
And still, nobody can touch You
or understand You:
You break the chains of each and every possible name,
Holy Spirit, Eternal Love.
(*St Theresa Benedicta of the Cross*)

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

Luke 15:11-32

Then He said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So the Father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

'When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch; so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men." So he left the place and went back to his father.

'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, "'Your brother has come, and your

father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound. “

He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.”

The father said, “My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.”

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Let us slowly read the text over and over again.

This is Chapter 15 of the Gospel of St Luke, known as the chapter of the parables about mercy, in the context of a theme which is very dear to St Luke: Jesus' attention towards sinners.

In Chapter 14 Jesus delivered His teachings at a meal, addressing them to His adversaries in the same way as now they are addressed to the crowds and to His disciples.

Chapter 15 is placed in the section of the gospel (9:51-19:28) dealing with Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, passing through Samaria and Judaea. This is not only a geographical journey, but also a theological one: the journey of thorough acceptance and trust in the Father. This is the second stop of the journey, in between 'Jesus' work in Galilee' (first stop) and 'the fulfilment in Jerusalem' (third stop). The fourth stop, the Ascension, is like a bridge introducing the reader into Acts, where St Luke's layout goes on, as well as the Word's journey, up to the eighth stop. The Word invites the readers not to distinguish between Jesus' time and the Church's one.

The path of salvation is therefore the founding theme of St Luke's theology, from the very beginning of his Gospel to the end of Acts: according to St Luke, those who believe in the risen Jesus Christ define themselves as 'those of the Way' (Ac 24:1-21).

The passage we are analyzing has to do with the meaning of Jesus' journey, with the path of salvation: this is the third parable that Jesus tells in order to respond to the Pharisees' and the scribes' complaining because He was welcoming publicans and sinners and eating with them. (Lk 15:1-2) This text has to do with salvation, come in order to look for man. The immediate link among the three parables is God's joy for a sinner who was lost and has been found...

The parable we will be praying over now reveals a way of speaking on Jesus' part which by its unique language introduces and involves in all simplicity the listeners into the tenderness and gratuitousness of the love of the Father. In the parable's language there is a turning point which shocks the listeners and urges them to decide which side they want to stand by.

Let us analyze the text:

- a) 11-13
- b) 14-19
- c) 20-24
- d) 25-32

a) The share of the heritage and departure

A father and two sons. Is this a story of property divided or of a quest for independence? By his request, is the prodigal son anticipating the death of his father, or is he moved by a longing for life? There is no definitive answer to those questions. However, it is interesting to point out that line 12 translates what the younger son requests as his share of the inheritance with 'ousia', that is, 'substance'. What is that substance? The Greek text answers: the father shares his 'bìon', his 'life'. This term will be used by St Luke in Chapter 21:4 to refer to wealth: the widow too will put into the treasury of the Temple all that she owns, that is, her life. Here, the father divides his wealth between his two sons, both of them. He has divested himself of his wealth, of his life, but still goes on living. He has become utterly 'gift'. According to Jewish law, to request one's share of the inheritance before the father's death was a crime, and the father could have had the son condemned because of that. On the contrary, he complies with the request, and so the son is able to leave for a distant country, with his 'load' of the father's life (the younger son used to get one third of the inheritance). And he squandered his part of substance "on a life of debauchery". To translate this idea, the Greek text makes use of the term 'asotos', that is, 'as a non-saved man'. We can link this kind of life to the squandering of his part of substance, of life: he is living against himself, in a distant country, because he is far away from his true identity, from his true image (St Bernard would speak of the "region of dissimilitude"). It is in this distant country, far from communion, that his nature and identity are 'squandered'.

In this first part of Jesus' parable we find the theme of the relationship between brothers, so common in the Old Testament (Cain & Abel, Jacob & Esau) and well known to Jesus' listeners. When St Luke was writing, it could also denote the relations between the Jewish Christians (the elders) and Gentile Christians (younger children). If this was the case, St Luke would have offered his own interpretation, a first interpretation, of the parable.

In addition to that, the Torah rules on how to deal with a rebel son – he could even be stoned – (cf Dt 21:18-21) were well known to the Pharisees and the scribes.

As we have seen, Jesus' speech takes the lead from realities well known to His listeners, from realities belonging to a real time and space, in order to introduce us into what is unspeakable of His Father's love. We could say that Jesus Himself is God's greatest parable, God come into time and space, letting us know the Father, by His life and being. Now He is talking, in such a way that whoever is ready to question certainties and to enter the realm of paradox, to interact with that disturbing and shocking element, will be able to understand the novelty of a Face.

b) Debauchery and coming to his senses

The more the young man goes far away from the giver of his part of nature, of life, the more he feels he lacks something: “a severe famine”, the text says, and the son starts experiencing “the pinch”. It is as if he were out of orbit, far from the centre of gravity, subject to a centrifugal force... Then the young man, who had left in search of freedom, “hires himself out” (‘ekollete’) to one of the local inhabitants. However, in the region of dissimilitude, to hire oneself out to one of the inhabitants is equal to thoroughly distort one’s own identity: the son becomes a servant feeding pigs, who “would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them”.

Jesus’ listeners could grasp that the son’s debauchery was thorough, given that pigs were impure animals, defiling whoever would come into contact with them.

Now I advise you to go back to the beginning of the story, to the load of life he has received from his father: do you think it may have disappeared from his being? In spite of his attaching himself to another man, in spite of this attachment making a slave of him, that life is not dead in his inner self; maybe it is still existent as a memory. It is this memory that lets him come to his senses, unconsciously calling him back to life, because “here I am dying of hunger”.

So he prepares a speech and leaves the far away country, going back to the place where life is preserved; but he still has a distorted image of his father and of himself: “Treat me as one of your hired men”.

The original problem still persists: the relationship between his father and his self is seen as a coercion...

What is the message for Jesus’ listeners? The theme of the people of Israel who falsely believe that by running after idols they may find freedom while in fact they become slaves (cf Jr 2:23); the story of a debauched man who has defiled himself then decides to go back home as a servant. But this is still the prelude of the story. The Pharisees and the scribes are impatiently waiting to hear the rest of the story, in particular the last part, dealing with the father’s behaviour towards his prodigal son, ready to reiterate their accusations: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”.

But this will be perhaps a further development, because at the moment the son is willing to be treated as one of his father’s hired men, and those do not eat at the master’s table.

c) The meeting, going back to life, and the feast

But now the father makes of this well-prepared meeting a surprising event. As soon as he sees him, even though he is still a long way off, he is moved to pity and runs to the boy, clasps him in his arms (literally, “he falls over his neck”) and kisses him. This refers to Gn 46:29 and to 2 Sam 14:33. But we could also see his falling over his son’s neck as the one and only yoke – gratuitous love – and the one and only burden: he who wanted to break the yoke of the law, of the Covenant, now receives the burden of love, which must be welcomed, as well as the burden of a renewed Covenant, sealed by kiss.

What do the Pharisees and the doctors of the law disagree with? In their view the son should do penance first, do good deeds, observe the Law to be purified from sin; only then could he be reintegrated. In their view, clasping in one's arms a man defiled by contact with pigs, is indeed defiling...

The son's speech is interrupted by the father: he manages to say that he no longer deserves to be called son, and that's it. He immediately receives the "best robe", the ring with the father's seal and the sandals of free men. The belief of Jesus' listeners was that in order to be sons, one would need merit, one would need to be worthy, that sonship could be gained or lost. Jesus' listeners believed that one should be worthy before he could approach God. This is the turning point of the parable: the father surprises everybody, by giving the dress "first" as a symbol of a dignity lost but not destroyed, as a symbol of life that the father has shared between his sons at the beginning. Now, that unconscious memory, given at the origin and now acknowledged through the symbol of the dress, together with the ring of the seal (as a proclamation of communion of goods), and with the sandals (the sign of a renewed liberty; slaves used to go barefoot), becomes an official investiture.

The young man has to entrust himself into the hands of him who never ceased to wish to have him back into communion. In that wish we can see the historical path of Jesus, His wish to celebrate the New Covenant with man, as St Luke relates at the Last Supper: "I have ardently longed to eat this Passover with you..." (Lk 22:15) It is a banquet of communion... And the father of the parable gives orders to prepare a banquet of communion too, for a son "that was dead and has come back to life".

The banquet linked to the Covenant is reminiscent of Is 25:6; the messianic banquet that Jesus gives in advance, before His death and resurrection: Christ associated Himself to man's death in order to give him back life, as He is a "Life-giving Spirit" (1 Co 15:45).

The parable highlights a twofold path: the amazing face of the Father, and the face of Jesus, who by His life reveals the Father's face in history.

We find once again the theme of Chapter 15: Jesus' journey is the path of salvation, the path of Him who came "to seek out and save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). Seeking what was lost is typical of the three parables of this chapter. It is indeed also what Jesus says about Himself after entering Zacchaeus' house (19:9-10).

The verb 'to save' makes line 13 resound, reminds us of that son who lived as an 'unsaved' man in a distant country, lost and found, dead and come back to life (cf 15:32), who let himself be reconciled and invited to the feast of the renewed communion, establishing the circle of life once again: "God, being rich in faithful love... raised us up with Him and gave us a place with Him in Heaven, in Christ Jesus. It is through grace that you have been saved." (Ep 2:4-6)

d) The other son, lost

All the features of the parable, placing narrator and listener one in front of the other so that they may interact, and provoke a change of perspective in the listener, come to the fore in the reaction of the elder son. Without going far away

he lives as if he were alienated from his self and a slave within the home. Alienation from his self made him lose sight of reality. “All I have is yours,” the father says to him, referring to the two thirds of inheritance that were due to him. He was living in superabundance and spoiled communion because of a kid. Then comes his father’s invitation to discover the truth about his self once again, so that he may live within reality with no paranoia, an invitation to somebody else who was also ‘lost’ – in a way – and who does not accept to be found. This is Jesus’ hidden invitation to His listeners, to the Pharisees and the doctors of the Law who “pride themselves on being upright and despise everyone else” (Lk 18:9), as Jesus says in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. Will the elder brother take part in the feast, in the end?

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

Jesus’ language makes us meditate on both the way He speaks (the parable) and its contents.

A parable makes use of a bi-directional language: from reality to a fiction (in the same way as allegory does); then from fiction to reality, and a teaching dealing with the specific reality of the listeners. It is a humble language, originating from Jesus’ humanity: He decides to face complaints by letting us peep into the meaning of His path as well as gaze at the face of God; and by giving His adversaries an opportunity to change their minds. Even when He provokes His listeners, Jesus’ humanity is a perennial act of love, of humble love.

I urge you to re-read nn^o 38 and 42 of the Rule of Life.

Let ourselves be reconciled: which image of our selves do we have in relation to God? The greatest humility we should strive to reach is perhaps letting ourselves be recreated day after day, entrusting our shortcomings to Him, letting ourselves be invited to the feast of communion.

Please let me quote here St Julian of Norwich:

“By His tolerance, God lets us fall; in His blessed love, through His power and wisdom, He keeps us close to Him and protects us; through His mercy and grace, He raises us up to a joy one thousand times greater.”

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

I think that perhaps you are fed up
with people who say they are at your service but with the tone of a commander,
who say they know you but with the tone of a professor,
who say they can approach you, but with the rules of a sportsman,
who say they love you, but as one would love in a stale marriage.
Let us lead our lives as a never-ending feast,
where Your encounter is always renewed, as in a dance,
in the arms of Your grace,
in the music filling the universe of love.

Lord, come and invite us to dance.
(Madeleine Delbrel)

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

Let us leave behind our fragilities and be filled with God's gratuitous and foreseeing love.

Let ourselves be invited in the great communion of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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

Let us share what the parable has aroused in us. Let us tell how it has become, in our own reality, a liberating experience.