

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

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

### **Introduction**

The Biblical man is down-to-earth, not academic, and gives its due relevance to the affective experience, a global dimension of life. Life is not made up of different, separate sectors, but the affective experience unifies and accompanies all his life. Take the Psalms, for instance. In them we find a huge variety and richness of feelings, which span from sorrow to joy, mirroring the human heart before God and its own history. In the Bible there is a literary genre called ‘Lamentations’, probably composed in Palestine to mourn for the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

In the gospels, Jesus presents a variety of feelings too. He is capable to perceive different inputs from different situations, with an affective resonance prompting Him to express many different sentiments, both of suffering and of joy. As a man He shares all our biological heritage. Nowadays, thanks to neurosciences, we can say that He shares our basic neuro-hormonal system, on which His natural affectivity is inserted and increases itself, in a relational system.

By the way, Love, from whom He comes and out of whom the Son is ‘made’, manifests Himself moulding natural affections. This implies that Jesus’ reaction to the impact of reality is revealing for us...

In the Man-God we can see on one hand God’s position rendered into our own human expressive codex; on the other hand, the behaviour of the new man and the new woman, living as children of God: in them we find both the resonance of the events they are surrounded by (natural affectivity) and the resonance of the urge coming from the gift of the Holy Spirit (supernatural affectivity).

Very often, Jesus’ sentiments express His sharing the different situations He encounters, His taking part in the lives of His interlocutors. This reveals who the God of Jesus is: He is ‘encounter’.

Let us be prepared then to walk in Jesus’ footsteps, in order for us to understand how He regards – as a Man – sufferings and joy, which are so relevant to each and every human being, as well as to us.

These two dimensions prompt us to become “like Christ”, that is, to progressively grasp and translate Jesus’ mind and actions with regard to all those He meets and to Himself too, into our own mentality and concrete actions, when sufferings and joy inevitably become part of our very lives.

The quality of our daily lives is defined by both sufferings and joy, while the quality and the intensity of our relations are defined by our perception and reaction to them. This principle comes from concrete experience, not from theological tracts! Sacred Scripture does not provide easy methods or explanations either... However, Jesus' life can teach us many things. In the first four Units we will deal with the way Jesus faces sufferings and death; in the last four Units we will deal with Jesus' happiness and joy.

## **Lectio n° 1**

### **Let fragility become flesh...**

If we go through the gospels, we can say that Jesus never exalted sufferings – and this disproves a certain ‘spirituality of sorrows’ – but that He always spent many of His energies by healing the sick and making their sufferings less unbearable, up to save them, according to the grade of their openness to Him and belief in Him. Never, not even once, did Jesus say that God wanted His children to suffer... Never, not even once, did Jesus state that sufferings come to us as the will of the Father... On the contrary, He faced illnesses, exclusion and even death as the envoy of God who-is-with-us, not against-us.

Of course, He was regarded by His people as a true wonder-worker, but was He really just a wonder-worker? We understand very little of the true reasons behind His gestures, the depth of tenderness expressed by the Man-God, letting the Father's closeness come to the fore. The Father would like to restore man to the integrity of his whole person, starting with the body... How obscure is the depth of the Incarnation, of Him who decided to share our human life in all its aspects! Do we let ourselves be transformed by the Incarnation, making it present in these days?

In this Unit we will go through a passage from St Mark's Gospel. What will it tell us about Jesus the Man, facing an illness such as leprosy which has to do with the clean and the unclean and which prevents the leper from establishing a relation either with God or with men? Can Jesus' relation with the leper tell us something about the quality of His human relation and at the same time shed light on the deepest meaning of this healing, so that we can be transformed by it?

#### **Let us invoke the Holy Spirit**

Holy Spirit sweeping over the waters,  
bring back harmony in us,  
abate the billows of anxiousness, dispel the noise of words,  
the whirlwinds of vanity,  
and let the Word that recreates everything  
rise amidst silence.  
Spirit of God, ‘sap’ of love  
of the infinite tree You are grafting us on,  
may all our brothers  
appear to us as gifts

within the huge Body where  
the word 'Communion' ripens.  
(Br. Pierre-Yves, Taizé Community)

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

### **Mark 1:40-45**

*40 A man suffering from a virulent skin disease came to Him and pleaded on his knees saying, 'If You are willing, You can cleanse me.' 41 Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out His hand, touched him and said to him, 'I am willing. Be cleansed.'*

*42 And at once the skin-disease left him and he was cleansed. 43 And at once Jesus sternly sent him away and said to him, 44 'Mind you tell no one anything, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your cleansing prescribed by Moses as evidence to them.'*

*45 The man went away, but then started freely proclaiming and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but stayed outside in deserted places. Even so, people from all around kept coming to Him.*

Let us read the text...

This text is from Chapter 1 of St Mark's Gospel, and it comes after the description of a typical day spent by Jesus in Capernaum. Verse 35 describes Jesus who leaves the house and goes off to a lonely place in order to pray. When His disciples find Him, He states that they have to go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that He can proclaim the message there too. He says to them: 'That is why I came'; literally, 'This is the reason why I left', not only 'why I left Capernaum', but also 'why I left the Father'. "And He went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out devils" (Mk 1:39).

Chapter 1 of St Mark's Gospel is closed by the episode of the cure of the man suffering from a virulent skin-disease, 'leprosy'. This episode is related by all the three synoptic gospels. This healing opens the series of Jesus' miracles like a programmatic manifesto: in Biblical tradition, healing the lepers is a sign of God's eschatological intervention, ie, a Messianic sign. In fact, this is the very proclamation for which Jesus left the Father. As a programmatic manifesto, it recalls Mt 1:1: "The beginning of the gospel ('good news') about Jesus Christ, the Son of God", the Messiah. This proclamation, this good news, is in fact Jesus Himself.

However, this present text is very important, because the reference to the leper makes of it a relevant text if we deal with God's liberating action, promised by the prophets. This Messianic proclamation will then be enriched progressively – all through St Mark's Gospel – by events revealing who Jesus really is, a fundamental issue for St Mark and his community.

From this first chapter, dealing with 'following Jesus' and admiring Him, St Mark will accompany his readers to the 'opposition to and misunderstanding of Jesus',

and finally to the acknowledgement of Jesus and profession of faith of the centurion under the Cross.

- a) 1:40            encounter
- b) 1:41-42        Jesus' feelings and deeds
- c) 1:43-44        Jesus' admonition
- d) 1:45            exchange – conclusion

a) *"A man suffering from a virulent skin disease came to Him..."*

This is very unusual, according to Israel's tradition! How can there be an encounter with somebody who, due to his illness, is deemed to be a living corpse, impure as death, not allowed to approach anybody?

"Death's First-Born gnaws his limbs." (Jb 18:13) It is not just a question of hygiene, but also a ritual-religious exclusion from the community. In fact, according to Leviticus 13:45-46, "anyone with a contagious skin-disease" must "live alone and outside the camp" and "shout 'Unclean! Unclean!'" in order for him not make anything else or anybody else unclean, keeping himself apart from the life of the community. But what is the hidden meaning of that?

In the Jewish tradition, 'clean' is the man who takes part in worship, or the things that are used for worship; while 'uncleanness' prevents one from any act of worship whatsoever; and its end must be certified through a specific ritual.

Each and every physical corruption is perceived as a menace to life, because life belongs to God alone. This is the reason why leprosy is considered an illness that causes uncleanness, in the same way as any other loss of life such as bleeding (blood is where life resides) or death. We can say that, in Israel's view, anything that diminishes vitality hinders one in his approach to God-Life, as well as it prevents him from getting in touch with His mystery.

In spite of all that, God alone can heal from a virulent skin-disease (cf Nb 12:4-6; 2 K 5:1-27). It is a vicious circle: those suffering from leprosy cannot approach God in the Temple, given that they are unclean, and thus they cannot be healed. They cannot approach God who is the only one who can heal them.

Thus, we realize that this first verse is not just describing one of Jesus' encounters with the sick, but also the transgression of Israel's law by someone who is looking for physical healing as well as for the end of the exclusion from contact with God.

*"If You are willing, You can cleanse me."*

We must pay attention to the fact that the man has no doubt that Jesus will be able to cleanse him: it is a very powerful statement! Pleading on his knees, he begs and waits for Jesus' consent, so that he may be re-instated in the community. Here the steps are upturned; first comes the transgression (going to God) and the healing, instead of the ritual, which comes second. The man asks Jesus to make His will manifest. Is Jesus willing to upturn the steps?

b) Facing the sufferings of someone who has been excluded from the community and, above all, from communion with God, Jesus is moved to pity. Here "feeling sorry for him" renders the term 'spalgchnisteis', which means that His loins are filled with pain, as a woman in labour (cf Is 21:3). In the Old Testament this term

is used only with reference to Yahweh, while in the New Testament only with reference to Jesus.

Other manuscripts have the term ‘orghisteis’, ‘to become enraged’, highlighting the rage against evil, against the defaced man, against a sickness likened to death, ravaging the creature. However, Jesus’ reaction does not consist only in “feeling sorry”, but He also acts. He, exactly like the leper, transgresses Jewish laws, by going closer to the man, by stretching out His hand, by touching him with no fear. This is a new path, revealing to us how we must relate to those who have been excluded, with all our tenderness. In addition to that, St Mark shows how Jesus is the One who wants the relation between man and God to be upturned. We are not allowed to approach God only if we are pure... On the contrary, it is God Himself who approaches all who have been excluded, who welcomes them, who cleanses them, destroying the separation.

Jesus says, “I’m willing”... This is proclamation of the good news, proclamation for which He has ‘left’ the Father. It is God the Father’s will itself to approach man, to renew him, to re-instate him in the communion with Him.

God is Love. This Love is joined to the affective human dimension in Jesus, and comes to the fore as compassion, closeness, labour pains. It would like to give life and abolish the sufferings and solitude of those who are far away from Him, excluded because they are regarded as lacking life. But at the same time it is a Love that operates, is incarnated in the leper who is begging Jesus and is cleansed. Only Love can recreate putrescent flesh. Only Love can cleanse much better than ritual. From the bottom, we can only acknowledge our shortcomings and entrust ourselves to Him.

“I’m willing!” renders a Greek indicative perfect, which denotes a durative action, going on over time. Then, we may regard this “I’m willing” as a huge echo resounding through history, up to our own times, and cleansing all suffering and exclusion: “I’ve come to meet you so that I can give you a new flesh, so that I can give you a new life, so that I can abolish separation and restore you to Life.”

c) Verse 43 opens with a puzzling description of Jesus: “He sternly sent him away” and admonished him... Is it that He cannot suffer praise, admiration and hosannas, which will spread an idea of the Messiah far from His deeply felt nearness to the human condition? Jesus is the Messiah who queued up with sinners at the Jordan to be baptized by St John. Or is it that He is irritated because the man displays a distorted relation with God?

In fact, ‘to send away’ could be interpreted in a spiritual sense, ie, to change his way of thinking, to send him away from the views of that time. In any case, the verb (‘exeballein’) occurs also in verse 34, where it means ‘to drive out devils’. There is then a parallel between Jesus’ power, revealed while He is driving out devils, and the power coming forth from Him while He is cleansing the leper. Thus this text becomes a symbol of His absolute rule over sickness and death.

“As evidence to them” (v. 44): this is not just the positive prescription of Leviticus (“...show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your cleansing prescribed by Moses”) but also a denunciation (cf Mk 6:11; 13:9). This event therefore becomes – as it is typical of the gospel – a salvific proposal or condemnation.

The priest acted on behalf of the Judaic institutions that made an outcast of the leper.

What Jesus revealed of His relation with God the Father (the Messianic and eschatological sign of His presence), proclaims the end of those discriminating and segregating institutions. People had to pay a price to them, while now Jesus is inaugurating the time of God's gratuitousness.

d) There is an exchange: "The man went away, but then started freely proclaiming and telling the story everywhere." "Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but stayed outside in deserted places." (1:45)

It is true that He has touched the man and is therefore 'unclean'. Here, the issue is no longer to be 'clean' or 'unclean'... Here Jesus takes upon Himself man's flesh, man's frailty, what is the symbol of death, and later on He will experience it Himself in His flesh. Through the Incarnation, God 'touches' mankind in the most radical and original way, so that they may enter communion with Him; He touches them so that they are transformed and live in communion with Him. God Himself is the first and foremost 'community' for man, the source of each and every social or religious community. And Jesus touches, becomes unclean, takes upon Himself the leper's and the outcast's loneliness. In this exchange, He will tread the path of increasing loneliness, of being an outcast: alone at Gethsemane, alone at the trial, alone with death out of the city walls (Mt 21:39; Heb 13:12). He will be the 'Forsaken' (Mk 15:34) who entrusts Himself to the Father on the Cross: He is 'polluted', and is treated as a sinner. He is the true leper, but paradoxically a leper who cleanses man like the bronze serpent raised as a standard in the desert, healing all those who had been bitten by a serpent but looked at it (cf Nb 21). He is the true leper taking upon Himself all the wounds of leprosy: they have turned into the wounds of the crucified Jesus, which are not a sign of decay but the sign of utter love turning into Life. They cleanse, as 1 P 2:24 says. The Forsaken, entrusting Himself to the Father, turns the "I will" said to the leper so that he could be re-instated into communion, into a "Yes" resounding for eternity, and which is addressed to each and every man and woman, showing them the path of communion to the Father.

## **2. Meditatio**

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

How much are we afraid of or just embarrassed because of our neighbour's sufferings, that may involve us, change our lives, reawaken our own sufferings?

Should we let ourselves be crushed or turned upside down by them? No, the aim is not to bear unbearable burdens, but rather to change our will and affectivity in order for us to pass from segregation to communion. Nowadays purification may mean 'to include the outcast', and to include them for free.

The sufferings caused by segregation do not demand from us a fight to change the legal practice, but rather to put at stake our own affections, so that we may be exactly where our neighbour is: 'going out', instead of 'dragging others in'. Going

out and changing role – as psychology would put it – or going out to the peripheries – as Pope Francis would say it: in both cases, we have to change our point of view. Incarnation is God’s greatest ‘jump’ to enter His ‘peripheries’: the human being.

Therefore, fragility must become flesh in our very lives, as our lifestyle, following in the footsteps of Jesus. We must shorten the distances between our neighbours and ourselves by compassion; and the consequent purification / inclusion must communicate the breath of life.

I invite you to re-read nn° 14-15 of our Rule of Life, focussing on poverty. Maybe we may also be helped by the personal experience of Vittorino Andreoli, described in his book ‘The man of glass’.

“I am weak and, paradoxically, I have to deal with the power of fragility. A power which is far from stability and is not at all ‘shatterproof’.

I devoted my time to mental illness, to sorrows masked by nonsense, to depression, to sufferings becoming silence, making man’s identity twofold, making of him a schizophrenic.

Many regards this job as typical of strong men, of iron men who do not break, of men of stone whose skin is smoothed by wind, who may change their form but who always remain steadfast to their destiny.

In fact, fragility has to do with time and its passing. Well, if I have been in the past and still be a good psychiatrist, if I have been able to help my mental patients, that was and is due to my fragility, to my worry that mental illness may lie within me too, to my fragility which in my view is able to divide my identity in two, to depress me, to make me want to disappear in order to cancel the sorrow I feel around and within me.

And sorrow is one of the features of fragility.

That is why I want to make my fragility known to everybody, even to my mental patients and to all those who run to me as if they could get anchored to a rock. They have to know that they are attaching themselves to a crystal vase from Bohemia or Murano, a coloured vase that may attract them thanks to its weird form and charm. Many times I, a fragile psychiatrist, have been in danger of shattering myself into many pieces like crystal.

But it is this very fragility that may help others to live. It helped me understand the fragility of other people and to respect it; it helped me be careful not to manipulate them, not to fake the picture.

I loved even the fragments of man, and I devoted myself patiently to put them back together.

Fragility is able to rebuild man, while power destroys him, shatters him to pieces which later on turn into dust.”

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

Lord Jesus, I am poor  
and You are poor too.  
I am weak,  
and You are weak too.  
I am a man,  
and You are a Man too.  
All my greatness  
comes from Your littleness.  
All my wisdom  
comes from Your folly!  
I shall run to You, Lord,  
who heal the sick,  
strengthen the weak,  
give joy once again  
to hearts immersed in gloom.  
I shall follow You, Lord Jesus.  
(St Aelred of Rievaulx)

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

In the silence of our souls, let us let the affective dimension be free and be enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Let us let ourselves be led to that ‘jump’ that allows us to stay inside the heart of those who are experiencing exclusion and loneliness: there we will be able to contemplate God too.

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

Let us share this Word by including and healing each and every of the Sisters, by renewing our unity in diversity, where no one can feel excluded from communion.