

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

Lectio n° 2 The struggle to say 'Yes'

Introduction

Very important decisions, full of suffering, cannot be delayed: suffering makes both our bodies and our souls stumble while we see a light out of the tunnel of turbulence which tears us apart.

The awareness that we are treading on the path of faithfulness to what we have perceived as our one and only Good, prompts our human dimension – made of body, soul and spirit – to face the drama of having to choose between opposite solutions, and to be misunderstood by our relatives, friends and neighbours when we commit ourselves thoroughly to God through a personal and definitive choice, made in all solitude.

Jesus too, in St Matthew's Gospel, treads a path of increasing awareness that both His person and the face of God revealed by Him are being met with opposition. Now He has to face sufferings.

In the passage we are dealing with in our Lectio, Jesus is sorrowful, facing the evidence of a violent death in the near future. He is sorrowful and anguished. His human will has to overcome many different feelings...

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

O Holy Spirit,
soul of my soul,
in You alone I can exclaim: Abba! Father!

It is You, O Holy Spirit of God,
who make me able to beg the Father,
and also who tell me what I have to ask.

O Spirit of Love,
make me wish to walk on God's same path:
only You can make this wish arise.

O Spirit sweet and tender,
conform my will to Yours, always,
so that I may know with a clear sight,
love with an ardent heart and act efficaciously.
Amen
(St Bernard of Clairvaux)

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

Matthew 26:36-46

36 Then Jesus came with them to a plot of land called Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, 'Stay here while I go over there to pray.' 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with Him. And He began to feel sadness and anguish. 38 Then He said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and stay awake with me.' 39 And going on a little further He fell on His face and prayed. 'My Father,' He said, 'if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as You, not I, would have it.' 40 He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping, and He said to Peter, 'So you had not the strength to stay awake with me for one hour? 41 Stay awake and pray not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing enough, but the flesh is weak.' 42 Again, a second time, He went away and prayed: 'My Father,' He said, 'if this cup cannot pass by, but I must drink it, Your will be done!' 43 And He came back again and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy. 44 Leaving them there, He went away and prayed for the third time, repeating the same words. 45 Then He came back to the disciples and said to them, 'You can sleep on now and have your rest. Look, the hour has come when the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Get up! Let us go!, Look, my betrayer is not far away.'

Let us read the text...

According to the narrative-theological layout, St Matthew's Gospel is divided into three parts. This passage belongs to the third part, entitled 'The supreme fulfilment' (16:21-28:20), and in particular to the second section which follows the first one with its three prophecies of the Passion. It presents the fulfilment of the Kingdom which the Son of Man inaugurated by His passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus. In this third part, the issue underlying the second one, ie 'Who is the Messiah?', finds a definitive solution. In the verses of this passage the answer is slightly different from the parallels we find in St Mark's and St Luke's Gospels, because they show us a Messiah acting according to St Matthew's worldview, and that can be understood in the light of that worldview, as a fulfilment of the Sermon of the Mount and so on. Matter-of-factly, it is possible to comprehend St Matthew's Christological and soteriological message to his community, by reading the text in the light of the themes that have

already been presented to the reader in other parts of the Gospel. In a word, it is possible to comprehend Matthew with Matthew.

The passage dealing with Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane is a very 'dense' text, showing us two different paths: the disciples' and Jesus'. Immediately before this we find the announcement of the scandal of the disciples "falling away" from Jesus and of St Peter's denial. But everybody joins St Peter in saying: "Even if I have to die with You, I will never disown You."

Let us divide the text in its different parts...

Introduction: "Stay awake with me." (36-38)

First scene: "Stay awake and pray..." (39-41)

Second scene: "Your will be done." (42-43)

Third scene: "You can sleep on now and have your rest." (44-46)

Introduction: "Stay awake with me." (36-38)

36 Then Jesus came with them to a plot of land called Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, 'Stay here while I go over there to pray.' 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with Him. And He began to feel sadness and anguish.

38 Then He said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and stay awake with me.'

Verse 36 begins with "Then", and we can gather from it that this is the sequel of the preceding scene. St Peter and all the disciples told Jesus that they would not deny Him, "then" Jesus goes with them to a plot of land called 'Gethsemane' which means 'olive mill', and invites His disciples to sit down and wait for Him to finish His prayer. He goes "with them": the beginning of the Gethsemane crisis is the moment when the disciples' way of following starts being put to the test.

In these first few verses we find three references to previous passages of Sacred Scripture:

Gn 22:5. Abraham leaving his servants at the foot of Mt Moriah, and going up with Isaac only. Jesus is compared both to Abraham the Just, given that He leaves His disciples and goes up on His own, and to Isaac too, the son who is to be sacrificed. Jesus, exactly like Abraham, has to tread the path of trust and obedience to God.

Mt 17:1-9. The Transfiguration. Here and there the witnesses are the same three disciples. There they saw a manifestation of Christ in His divinity / glory. Here they will see the exaltation of His humanity, through its debasement.

Mt 20:20-21. Exactly like here, there St James and St John are called "the sons of Zebedee". Gethsemane is thus linked to the episode that happened "on the road to Jerusalem", when the two brothers stated that they could drink the same cup that Jesus was going to drink, ie sufferings and sorrow. They made the mindless,

explicit request to be involved in the Master's path... and now they are going to be involved for real.

In this text we see that Jesus' human / affective dimension is deeply touched: suffering is expressed by terms such as 'sadness' ('lupeistai') and 'anguish' ('ademonein') like in a 'crescendo', and the verb tense is the present infinitive which denotes duration. The verb 'ademoneo' is the hardest of all the Greek words used in the New Testament ('lupeo', 'baréo', 'ademoneo') to denote great anguish, depression. It is a "sorrow to the point of death", and this sorrow belongs to the 'psiché' ('psychic side of man'): here Psalms 42:6-12 and 43:5, the words of the upright man in prayer, resound. The verbal form used suggests us that, on one hand, this experience is a perennial dimension of human nature: an empty space devoid of meaning, a repulsive abyss, the perspective of 'no life', of the end, of a deeply-felt physical as well as moral and spiritual suffering crushing man. On the other hand, it allows us to see how Jesus' humanity keeps on feeling, as the New Adam, each and every man's anguish.

Jesus asks them to "wait and stay awake" with Him. He asks St Peter, but it is a request for all of them: St Peter is the leader of the whole group and, according to Mt 16:18, of the whole Church too.

The verb 'to wait' ('meinate') is an aorist, denoting a precise and limited action; while the verb 'to stay awake' ('gregoreite') is a present, denoting a durative action. Therefore, to stay in that place / situation is not definitive... On the contrary, to stay awake must be done constantly, all the time, so that the approaching adverse situation might not be disruptive.

The verb 'gregoreite' originates from 'egeiro', whose root is 'agora', ie to gather one's senses. Then we can understand that, when confronted with an experience of deep anguish, we have to gather all of our senses so that anguish, nonsense, death might not prevail by their disruptive and destructive dimensions.

But how is that possible? The relation between Jesus' and the disciples' respective paths is expressed by "with Me". "You have to stay awake with Me."

This is the human wish on Jesus' part to be kept company, to be supported in His fight. However, if we re-read the passage in the light of the Transfiguration, we will see that there the disciples, after seeing Jesus' glory, were invited by the Father to listen to Him; while here, at the manifestation of the suffering Son, they have to be present with Him, taken by Him and with Him into the fight, into the anguish of the prayerful upright Man persecuted, "with Him" not to be destroyed. Thus, "Then" of verse 36 acquires a new meaning: in order not to be vanquished by the scandal of death and not to deny Jesus, we need to stay awake with Him.

First scene: "Stay awake and pray..." (39-41)

39 And going on a little further He fell on His face and prayed. 'My Father,' He said, 'if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as You, not I, would have it.' 40 He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping, and He said to Peter, 'So you had not the strength to stay awake with me for one hour? 41

Stay awake and pray not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing enough, but the flesh is weak.'

In these verses Jesus' prayer reveals His internal struggle. Because of the anguish, the feeling of emptiness, the abyss of death, Jesus' human will begs the Father that the cause of His existential trouble may pass Him by. Has He to close His eyes like the disciples did, or would it be better to try to establish a relationship?

Jesus is talking with the Father. In His internal struggle, He is comparing His human will with the Father's, and He establishes a very strong relationship with the Father, with His Father. Even though He is in the depths of darkness, and even though He can perceive very little of the presence of the Father, the Son is entrusting Himself to Him from Whom He has received everything, by Whom alone He is known, the One He knows and that He reveals to the world (Mt 11:27).

This knowledge is obscure, non-rational, and derives from the relationship of coexistence, as they cannot be different in love... even though now He is in a dramatic condition! This is the "cup". A condition He abhors.

Giving Oneself to the Other, and vice versa, eternally, is bringing Father and Son towards the historical "hour", to the labour pains involved by a complete gift of Self, always and everywhere and in all conditions.

In spite of that, Jesus' human will abhors suffering! Is He hoping that – as it happened to Abraham on the mount when he had to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac – "the Lord will provide"? (Gn 22:8)

Silence is great... But the Son cannot be dissimilar to the Father, even though He is anguished to death... And He has to overcome His natural will of self-preservation, His human instinct that cannot accept death: "Nevertheless, let it be as You, not I, would have it." In fact, He knows the Father's will in Himself, given that He is the Son, and that will is Love (Mt 12:7; 18:14), the gift of Life. He has to trust in spite of His human will, entrusting Himself to an embrace that at this stage appears blurred in the distance: "Let it be as You, not I, would have it."

In the meantime, His disciples are asleep. They did not have the strength to stay awake even for an hour. Two things must be highlighted: St Matthew's double hint at the three disciples' weakness; and Jesus prompting them to stay awake and pray once again.

They "had not the strength": the verb used here is 'ischisate', further defined by the remark that "the spirit is willing enough, but the flesh is weak" ('astenes').

The flesh is the human will that is incapable to stay awake, that has not the strength, that is asleep. But in spite of this inadequacy, Jesus orders them to "stay awake and pray".

All those human shortcomings may be overcome by prayer, by the relationship with the Father. "Stay awake and pray", so that they may not be overcome by temptation. Here the core of the Sermon of the Mount resounds, ie the 'Our Father', in which Jesus taught His disciples how not to be led into temptation (Mt 6:13). A new light is lit: in order for us not to be led into the temptation of denying Jesus, of being overcome by the scandal of death, we need to hold fast to the Father, and pray like Jesus taught us to.

Second scene: “Your will be done.” (42-43)

42 Again, a second time, He went away and prayed: ‘My Father,’ He said, if this cup cannot pass by, but I must drink it, Your will be done!’ 43 And He came back again and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy.

The core of Jesus’ prayer is revealed in the midst of suffering. The path His human will is treading passes through the tunnel of anguish, to an exit which is a place of unexpected liberty and peace: the will of the Father.

According to St Matthew, where does the Father’s will reside? Verse 42 once again refers us to the Sermon of the Mount, to the “Thy will be done” of the Our Father (Mt 6:9-10)...This will is not to be proclaimed but to be put into practice (Mt 12:50; 21:31) and its consists in what Jesus taught us (Mt 5:21-48), including love for our enemies (5:43). It is not an abstract will, but a will that prompts us to act, a will of salvation, “that none of these little ones should be lost”, (Mt 18:14) and that is fulfilled by mercy, not by sacrifice (cf Mt 12:7).

However, from an historical point of view, the Father’s will for Jesus is equal to the “cup”. A cup that cannot “pass by”, and that He must drink on behalf of mankind. He has to pass through this suffering in His own very personal way, but open to a universal horizon. The cup is in fact the same cup from which, in the supper of the end of time, all men will have to drink from. They will have to drink His Blood, that is, His life of Man-God which is the only one capable to re-establish the Covenant with the Father, and transform them for a new communion, whose symbol is the “new wine” He will drink with them “in the Kingdom of the Father” (Mt 26:27-29).

The Covenant, the transformation into the new communion, has to do with ‘will’, too: both the personal, single and unique identity of the man Jesus, and the will of the Son. Human will is brought into the wider horizon of the Son’s will, and it is led amidst sufferings to love exactly as the Father loves, so that “none of these little ones should be lost”. The little ones are first of all the sleeping disciples; and we too, who have “heavy eyes” and who are not able to see beyond the tunnel, to see mercy and not sacrifice, and to tread the path that leads to being able to love just as the Father does.

Third scene: “You can sleep on now and have your rest.” (44-46)

44 Leaving them there, He went away and prayed for the third time, repeating the same words. 45 Then He came back to the disciples and said to them, ‘You can sleep on now and have your rest. Look, the hour has come when the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Get up! Let us go!, Look, my betrayer is not far away.’

Leaving the disciples there, Jesus once again goes away and prays for the third time the same words. Here the words He uses to introduce the Our Father

resounds: “Do not use many words”. He repeats for the third time the same prayer: He does not add anything to it, but goes more and more into the depths of a true Presence. This relationship makes His human will mature, up to the point that He is able to entrust Himself to the Father’s will.

Now the disciples can sleep and have their rest. The Sermon of the Mount has been fulfilled, and there is no reason for the two pictures (Jesus / the disciples) to collide any longer. Now the disciples can sleep: here Jesus shows all His tenderness in front of their shortcomings. His ‘Yes’, His move within His human will, becomes a gift to their lack of strength. His struggle envelops them too and moves them in their turn... Now they can sleep: the hour of salvation is about to come and, after their weaknesses and denials, it will make them share the new life of Easter, the gift of being able to adhere to the love of the Father. They can rest: this is the goal that Jesus has achieved on their behalf by His struggle in Gethsemane. It is a gift that they receive from Jesus, who has conquered it for them: “Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest... Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29).

Thus the following sentence looks paradoxical: “Get up (‘egeireste’)! Let us go!” How can resting and getting up go together? Let us bear in mind that ‘gregoirete’ derives from the verb ‘egeiro’, which is the term used for the resurrection. We can gather therefore that there is a link between the “Stay awake!” of the beginning and this order, “Get up!”, between the resurrection and the rest which are God’s promise (Heb 4:11). This is the Easter path.

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

The depth of Jesus’ human experience shocks us: He has reached our own darkness in advance, He precedes us, He opens the way for us, He leads us while we are still in the tunnel.

In spite of all that, how difficult it is to find the core of a will redeemed by Jesus within ourselves, in our own sufferings!

Should we be scandalized by our own impermeableness? Jesus is not scandalized by us.

Giving birth: labour pains, being lacerated, a birth: suffering is a path to...

To stay awake, to be awake: suffering does not mean to be self-absorbed, sterile, destructive.

Prayer: suffering is not something to be repressed. On the contrary, it should be the core of an incessant prayer, begging and begging... carving a passage in God’s heart? No, I think it would carve a passage in our own selves, making us able to welcome God’s will and love that have been planted in the depths of our selves, to let them come to the fore and to put them into practice.

A leap of faith and trust: suffering comes to the fore by obeying and listening. How then can we adhere to God’s will? Not by being subject to a ‘foreign’ will, utterly different from us, to an enemy, but rather by acknowledging a Father who

has put into our hearts – in fact, we are His daughters – a promise of life; and by acknowledging the will / friendly voice revealing itself in the Son like a path of growth for us, the growth of love becoming flesh in each and every one of our own situations.

Thus, a very different light is shed on our own obedience. Let us read numbers 21-22 and 28 of our Rule of Life in order to rediscover the link between obedience and prayer and to put it into practice.

Now, let us read a passage by Martin Luther King. The brave fight of this Baptist pastor was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1964 and, later on, crowned by martyrdom (in 1968 he was killed in Atlanta).

“As the weeks passed, I began to realize that many of the threats were very serious. I started to hesitate and my fear increased. At the end of a very busy day, I went to bed very late at night... Then the phone rang. An angry voice said: “Nigger, we are fed up with you. Before next week ends, you will regret your move to Montgomery.” I put the phone down, but I could not sleep. It looked like all my fears would be present once again. I had reached the boiling point. I got up and started walking up and down the room. At the end, I went to the kitchen and prepared a cup of coffee. I was ready to give up. I was trying to find a way of disappearing, without looking too coward. In this state of worry, while bravery was nearly all gone away, I decided to let God decide. Holding my head in my hands, I bent over the kitchen table and prayed in a loud voice. I can remember well what I told God. “I stepped forward and stood for what I believe in. But now I’m worried. People confide in me and want to be lead by me, but If I lead them with no strength and courage, they will stumble. My powers are about to desert me. I am empty. I am about to give up.” In that very moment I became aware of the divine presence as never before. It was as if I could hear an inner voice, speaking reassuring words: “Stand for justice. Stand for truth. God will always be near you.” My worries left me nearly at once. My wavering ceased. Now I was ready to face everything.

Three nights after that, our home was destroyed by an explosion. It could sound ‘strange’, but when I got the news I was extremely calm. My experience of God had given me back both the courage and trust. Now I know that God can give us the inner resources to face the ‘storms’ and problems of life...”

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

My Father, I entrust Myself to You:
let it be done to me according to what it pleases You!
I thank You
for everything You will do to me.

I accept everything,

I am ready to do everything,
so that Your will may be fulfilled in me
and in all Your creatures.

I do not wish anything else, my God.
I entrust my soul
into Your hands.
I give her to You as a gift, my God,
with all the love my heart is capable of,
because I love You.

And I am urged by love
to give myself to others as a gift,
to entrust myself into Your hands with no limits,
with an infinite trust,
as You are my Father.

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

In the joy of the Holy Spirit, let us praise the Father and the Son. Let us taste in all trust Their reciprocal entrusting Themselves to One Another with an eternal obedience.

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

Let us share what we gathered from this text, as obedience to the Word.