

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

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

**Lectio n° 3
Let yourselves be converted to life**

Introduction

Jesus, confronted with the sorrow of those He loves, can lead us to convert our gaze on both life and death. Where is the boundary for all those who live in the love of Jesus?

A seed of continuity is already in all those who consent to Him. The sorrow of separation is not done away with, it cannot be suffocated, but it may be converted into something else... by living it in Jesus' presence, as there we are all alive. Will Lazarus be raised from the dead? In addition to the historical event, the evangelist St John relates how the gaze and the heart of the community of his disciples evolve; and how sorrow changes when they are in relation with the Lord of Life.

I suggest that you regard in this text the aspect of the change of mentality, a conversion of one's affections, represented by three specific people, the symbols of all the community and its journey. Martha, Mary and Lazarus become our own journey to Jesus' humanity, true humanity.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit, Come!

May Your Love erupt

by the richness of its fruitfulness.

May it become in me a spring of Life, of Your immortal Life.

But how can I present myself to You

without becoming utterly ready to follow You,

docile, open to Your effusion?

Lord, it is now Your turn to speak: what would You like me to do?

I am trying to be attentive to the sound of silence of Your Spirit

in order for me to grasp what Your plan is,

to open myself up to the mysterious invasion

of Your mercy.
Help me to give my life to You
without asking anything.
It will be a deed of love, a deed of hope,
trying to move You to come powerfully into my existence,
as You are a very generous Lord.
(Anastasio Ballestrero)

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

John 11:1-46

1 There was a man named Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha, and he was ill. 2 It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped His feet with her hair. 3 The sisters sent this message to Jesus, 'Lord, the man You love is ill.' 4 On receiving the message, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death, but it is for God's glory so that through it the Son of God may be glorified.'

5 Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 yet when He heard the news he was ill He stayed where He was for two more days 7 before saying to the disciples, 'Let us go back to Judaea.' 8 The disciples said, 'Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews were trying to stone You; are You going back there again?'

9 Jesus replied: 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? No one who walks in the daytime stumbles, having the light of this world to see by; 10 anyone who walks around at night stumbles, having no light as a guide.'

11 He said that and then added, 'Our friend Lazarus is at rest; I am going to wake him.' 12 The disciples said to Him, 'Lord, if he is at rest he will be saved.' 13 Jesus was speaking of the death of Lazarus, but they thought that by 'rest' He meant 'sleep'; 14 so Jesus put it plainly, 'Lazarus is dead; 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him.' 16 Then Thomas – known as the Twin – said to the other disciples, 'Let us also go to die with Him.'

17 On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already. 18 Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming she went to meet Him. Mary remained sitting in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died,' 22 but even now I know that God will grant whatever You ask of Him.'

23 Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24 Martha said, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.'

25 Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection. Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

27 'Yes, Lord,' she said, 'I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who was to come into this world.'

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, 'The Master is here and wants to see you.' 29 Hearing this, Mary got up quickly and went to Him. 30 Jesus had not yet come into the village; He was still at the place where Martha had met Him. 31 When the Jews who were in the house comforting Mary saw her get up so quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

32 Mary went to Jesus, and as soon as she saw Him she threw herself at His feet, saying, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33 At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who had come with her, Jesus was greatly distressed, and with a profound sigh He said, 34 'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see.' 35 Jesus wept; and the Jews said, 'See how much He loved him!' 37 But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man. Could He not have prevented this man's death?' 38 Sighing again, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening. 39 Jesus said, 'Take the stone away.' Martha, the dead man's sister, said to Him, 'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day since he died.' 40 Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?' 41 So they took the stone away. Then Jesus lifted up His eyes and said: 'Father, I thank You for hearing my prayer. 42 I myself knew that You hear me always, but I speak for the sake of all these who are standing around me, so that they may believe it was You who sent me.

43 When He had said this, He cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' 44 The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with strips of material, and a cloth over his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.'

45 Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what He did, believed in Him, 46 but some of them went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

Let us read the text over and over again, focussing on the different scenes and characters...

This is Chapter 11, which belongs to the first part of St John's Gospel, called the Book of Signs (chapters 1-12). This text belongs in particular to the last section, dealing with the last 'sign' and the foreshadowing of Jesus' 'hour'. This sign is the seventh one, and comes after the cure of the man born blind (chapter 9). It will be followed by the reactions of the Jews, who will decide about Jesus' fate.

If in Chapter 9 Jesus revealed Himself ("I am the Light") and gave the sign of the cure of the man born blind, here He reveals Himself as "the Resurrection and the Life" and gives the sign of Lazarus' resurrection. These formulas of self-revelation lead us back to the "I AM" of Exodus 3:14, to God's revelation to Moses in the burning bush.

Let us focus on these two interrelated elements: the formula of self-revelation and the sign.

“I AM” occurs here for the fifth time (from the beginning of St John’s Gospel), specified by a figured word. St John makes use of seven words/images to delineate his whole Christology, which couples the divine pre-existence of the Son of God (“I AM”) with His salvific action towards man, expressed by the terms ‘bread’, ‘shepherd’, ‘gate’, ‘light’, ‘resurrection and life’, ‘way-truth-life’, ‘the true vine’. This implies that Jesus is God-with-man and God-for-man: He fulfils Moses’ request that God should show His face. In St John’s Gospel Philip will have a similar request: “Show us the Father!” And Jesus will reply: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father...”

Man’s need of God lies behind each and every of the figurative phrases and words in the Gospel. St John helps us acknowledge it through the ideas/wishes mentioned along the way, as if we were treading on a path leading us to the ultimate need which is God-Life.

The sign. St John calls Jesus’ miracles ‘signs’. He mentions seven of them, a figure which refers to wholeness, given that they are enough to reveal and communicate to believers “the fullness of grace and truth” that came to the world through the Verb (cf Jn 1:14, 16).

This term, used in place of ‘dynamis’, tells us that St John does not give pride of place to the event in itself but rather to its meaning. He wants his readers to wonder what its meaning can be. The sign is indeed a signal inviting us to proceed onwards, up to the eighth sign: Jesus’ Resurrection, announced in 2:19, 21 and fulfilled in Chapter 20.

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

Introduction

Misunderstandings

Mankind’s journey

To take the stone away

To unbind the ties

Introduction

The setting of the whole event is Lazarus’ illness. We should wonder what that might mean.

The evangelist presents the characters: Mary and Martha, representing St John’s community trying to understand the relation between death and the new meaning of life. These characters are representative of the community because St John gives witness to their love-relationship with Jesus, ie the relationship all disciples should have. The disciples are those who are aware that they are loved. At first this love is understood as ‘friendship’: the two sisters use the term ‘fileo’ to describe Lazarus as loved by Jesus. Then the evangelist reveals what is still hidden to the three disciples: by saying that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus and by using the term ‘agapao’, he reveals that Jesus’ love is life-giving.

A peculiarity of this first part is the reference to a subsequent event, described in Chapter 12:1: Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a precious perfume (nard), then she wipes His feet with her hair. Perhaps the evangelist is telling us to pay attention to the journey of this woman-disciple, progressively becoming like the Bride of the Song of Songs: she is the only one who grasps Jesus' path, who accompanies Him in silence without putting obstacles in front of Him, and who symbolically foreshadows – by 'wasting' all that perfume – the 'waste' of the gift of His life. It is a prophecy of the burial: that perfume, the perfume of love, will last and will accompany Jesus... What is St John telling us?

Misunderstandings

"...when He heard the news he was ill He stayed where He was for two more days". St John then relates of a long debate between Jesus and the disciples who are not able to understand. Why should He go back to Judaea where the chiefs want to kill Him (cf 10:39)? Is Lazarus asleep or dead? The paradox is that Jesus rejoices ('chairò'): "...for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe". They will believe because He is going to 'awaken' him. He rejoices because of the new life that will be pervading Lazarus, who is a disciple of His. This is something still hidden to the eyes of His interlocutors, but that will be revealed soon.

"Are there not twelve hours in the day? No one who walks in the daytime stumbles, having the light of this world to see by; anyone who walks around at night stumbles, having no light as a guide." It is daytime: it is the time for Him to reveal the Father. When Jesus is talking of night and day, He has in mind the Palestinian day, made of two parts of 12 hours each, 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness. In St John's view, Jesus' life is like a day where the 12 hours of daytime are those that the Father has reserved for Jesus' activity as the incarnated Verb of God. These are the hours in which Jesus can walk and fulfil His mission of being an envoy; mission which will be fulfilled in His 'hour'. During daytime, Jesus can walk without stumbling, given that night has not come yet. Later on, when Judas goes out to betray Jesus, the evangelist will comment: "It was night" (13:30).

Mankind's journey: Martha and Mary towards Jesus

By now Lazarus has been in the grave for four days. This detail highlights death's irreversibility: according to the Jewish tradition, the dead could not reach Sheol unless their faces had changed, in any case not before three days. Then the dead man, like a shadow, could reach the place of the dead where his forefathers dwelt. The people who were staying inside the house should mourn in silence, while outside of the house the people could mourn with loud cries and shouts.

St John relates that "many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother". We infer from this that St John's community still belonged to the Jewish tradition, it did not have a specific Christian identity. In spite of all that, the evangelist seems to highlight how it is indeed the presence of the Man

Jesus to overcome the ancient beliefs. His behaviour leads Martha and Mary – each according to her own character – to regard death under a new light, through the effects of the relationship with Him, as the continuation of life.

The evangelist makes us readers start from two different perspectives (Martha's and Mary's): we can see both of them as different aspects of a journeying mankind, facing the fullness of humanity revealed by Jesus.

Martha is hasty and goes out to meet Jesus in order to reproach Him of His absence. However, she begs Him to ask from God an extraordinary intervention, as if He were a prophet. She is knowledgeable. In fact, when in order to provoke her Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again, “she knows” that her brother will rise again at the resurrection of the dead. While stating this, she shows that she is still rooted in Jewish tradition. How can she understand Jesus' word that He is “the resurrection and the life” then?

In my view, we should consider the verbs that the evangelist makes use of in order to highlight the durative dimension of the action of believing, when He says: “Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live”; “...and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”; “do you believe this?”

Martha's answer is positive: “Yes, Lord, I believe”. This verb remarks the result of a past action. Apparently this is a great sign of belief. However, it is still a belief in “the Christ, the Son of God, the One who was to come into this world”, that is a belief in something given for granted. Her faith is the fruit of Jewish faith, it is not able to open up to Jesus' novelty. In fact, St John is highlighting that Jesus' question demands a new way of saying ‘Yes’, especially because He has just revealed Himself (this is His 7th self-revelation): now He is “the resurrection” and “life”. Both resurrection and life are present in that very moment. Eternity, which does not refer to an increased duration of time but rather to a different quality of life, to a life made fruitful by love, to one's relationship with Love, can be perceived thanks to the fraternal and friendly relations demanding a ‘forever’.

Thus, resurrection does not overcome human sorrow, it is not just a goal to be reached, but appears as a dynamic reality, expanding itself and starting now, when we say ‘Yes’ to the Living One. The biological law of death cannot be overcome, but still the power of Love can pervade our whole lives making them eternal in a wider communion.

In fact, when Jesus orders to take the stone away from the tomb, Martha will say: “Lord, by now he will smell...”

Mary, sitting in the house, is called by her sister. She is the disciple who is able to wait. Martha secretly tells her that the Master wants to see her. Then she gets up quickly. She is the ‘vocated’ one, rising from her stillness to go and meet the Master. In Chapter 10 of the Gospel of St John, there is a reference to the voice of the Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, calling His sheep “one by one”: they are His, “they know His voice” and follow Him. They do not follow other people, only their own Shepherd. The sheep know the Shepherd's voice, giving His life for them: He calls them and they follow Him... And Mary, the ‘vocated’ one, goes out and meets Jesus.

Mary seems to us the disciple/sheep who is able to recognize the voice of the Master/Shepherd. The sheep ‘know’; Mary ‘knows’. In a Biblical sense, knowing

is not an intellectual act, but rather a relation of communion. Mary is the one who is starting a journey of communion with the One who gives “life to the full” (Jn 10:10).

She is burdened by sorrow like Martha, of course, and she also imputes her brother’s death to Jesus’ absence. However, St John lets us see that her attitude is slightly different from Martha’s. In fact, he shows the Jews seeing her get up (the Greek verb is ‘aneste’, ‘to rise again’); then, he shows her at Jesus’ feet, crying (the Greek term used here refers to mourning). All that makes us guess that her journey is different from Martha’s. Hers is a journey of communion-knowledge, instead of a journey of knowledge rooted in tradition. Her journey brings in itself a little seed of resurrection. She is more open to welcome the novelty of the Shepherd who gives life to the full. She is the one who, immersed in that communion-knowledge, will be able to grasp the depths of Jesus’ life, becoming a symbol of marriage (Jn 12:1ff) and a prophecy of the Bridegroom’s gift: she will anoint His body for the burial, but in advance.

We can see Mary’s journey, from being a disciple to becoming the symbol of spousal communion and prophecy, through the stage of Chapter 11: the response to a calling, allowing her tears to be transformed and pass from sorrow to Jesus’ way of being sorrowful, by encountering Jesus’ humanity.

Let us fix our gaze on Jesus’ humanity then. At first He seems to be annoyed by Mary and the Jews crying. We may suppose that He is annoyed because of their way of mourning and their desperation. But it could also be His rebellion against death and her quickness: He is Life, and He is facing death, the separation from someone He loves, and all that causes unhappiness.

His second reaction is distress. Here the term used is similar to the one used in 12:27 (after telling the little parable of the wheat grain that, unless it falls into the earth and dies, remains only a single grain, but if it dies it yields a rich harvest); as well as in 13:21 (when He announces that one of His is going to betray Him). Death will touch Jesus personally: He cannot be indifferent to this event, having to do with His feelings and His limitations as a man. Lazarus’ death is the sign most similar to Jesus’ own death and resurrection. It is true that St John shows us Jesus as a King, raised on the throne of the Cross. But even if He is not prone to the situation but freely masters the scene as a sovereign, His humanity is not free from distress. He is truly a man.

In spite of being distressed, Jesus respects the dimension of those who are in front of Him and poses Himself at their level. When He asks, ‘Where have you put him?’, the Jews answer, ‘Come and see’. This last sentence recalls Jesus’ very own invitation to His first disciples in 1:39, but the direction is utterly reversed. Jesus was inviting His disciples to a place of life, to the communion with the Father who is His ‘dwelling’, while the Jews invite Jesus to a place of death, to a completely different dwelling, a sepulchre. Jesus goes with them, He goes down to the level of those who are just able to see the sepulchral stone. His is the descent into ‘kenosis’, the dynamic of Incarnation: He will be put in a sepulchre too.

There Jesus weeps. The term used is ‘to shed tears’, a term different from that used for Mary’s and the Jews’ cry, and different also from that used when St Luke

describes Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem (Lk 19:41). Maybe St John wants to express something unique, the outpouring of a sorrow which has a different meaning. Here it is the Man-God who sheds tears, over His friends' sorrow, over His friendship with Lazarus... But He is also manifesting God's tears of love, shed because man blindly takes into consideration just the aspect of death, and he is a prisoner of the sepulchre, he cannot see anything else, while he should walk towards the place of life. Man is unable to grasp and welcome the new life. Shedding tears refers us also to Heb 5:7, where it is said: "During His life on earth, He offered up prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, to the One who had the power to save Him from death, and won a hearing by His reverence..."

Here too Jesus is the Son who addresses the Father, certain that He will grant Him His request, the Son who gives thanks, who is always in relation with Him. He is always the envoy who "cannot do anything by Himself, but can do only what He sees His Father doing" (Jn 5:19). "As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone He chooses" (Jn 5:21). "Whoever listens to my words, and believes in the One who sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgement such a person has passed from death to life" (Jn 5:24).

Jesus is always in relation with the Father, as well as with all those who are listening to His word. The latter, the perfect disciples, pass from death to life. Such is Lazarus, according to what Chapter 11 says.

And when Jesus cries in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!', we are reminded of Chapter 5: "In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming – indeed it is already here – when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and all who hear it will live."

To take the stone away

Jesus' humanity is inhabited by a very rich affective dynamic. It reveals that God is very close to us in the sorrow of a separation. He also wants to free His community from mourning when they are crushed by sorrow like by the stone of a sepulchre. Life (with capital 'L') confronts death: Jesus sighs again, before commanding to take the stone away. The people who are there have to take the stone away, but Martha has to learn to welcome the novelty, leaving aside the 'smell' of the corpse. The first step is to take the stone away. Jesus demands that they remove the obstacle, so that they may widen their horizon. Here we find the verb 'horao' in its future tense, 'opse', to denote the action of seeing the glory of God, if Martha believes. This form of the verb 'to believe' denotes seeing-experiencing. Here (11:40) the formula addressed to Martha by Jesus is similar to the one we find in 11:25b: "...even though that person dies, will live" parallel to "if you believe, you will see the glory of God". We can understand then that – like St Irenaeus says – "The glory of God is the living man", living forever in the One who is Life Himself (cf 11:26). The first step is to believe; the second one is to get rid of the 'big stone' of one's sclerotic mentality, hardened and heavy like stone, dividing one from his loved ones. If one gets rid of all that, the dead man is allowed to 'come out' because the Son is calling him to come out in a loud voice.

To unbind the ties

A further step is also needed: to unbind the ties and let him go free. In the community's view, Lazarus is still a prisoner of the "fetters of death" (cf Ps 115:3). Only the community will be able to unbind the ties with which they were imprisoning him in a death with no hope. They must let him go free, give him back to the new life, to the banquet of communion that St John describes in Chapter 12, where Lazarus will be sitting at the table and Mary will welcome the Guest with her perfume, thus celebrating the humanity of the Bridegroom who, out of love, will experience the burial Himself.

2. Meditatio

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

Jesus suggests us that we are made for life. We are a unit of body, soul and spirit, created for receiving the Spirit of the Risen One, so that the body may become transparent and the place where the life-relation expanding beyond death can grow.

To which kind of tears do mine resemble? Are they a desperate mourning or are they similar to Jesus' sorrow?

Which 'big stone' prevents my life – and other people's lives – from evolving? Am I able to see what is sclerotic in myself?

Which ties keep me still, prevent me from being free, and prevent me from freeing other people's sorrow? What can I learn from Jesus' pedagogy, from His humanity?

Sometimes it seems that our words should defend God, like the words of Job's friends. In fact, the one and only truth is that we are shattered to pieces by sorrow. Maybe we should let Jesus convert our distress into His tears.

Let us re-read n° 9 of our Rule of Life with the awareness that we always have to move forward, and that this journey will give hope to sorrow.

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

Lord Jesus Christ, may You be so kind
to draw near this sepulchre of mine,
to wash me by Your tears,
given that in my hardened eyes
I do not have enough tears to wash my sins away!
If You cry for me, I will be saved.
If I am worthy of Your tears

I will get rid of the smell of all my sins.
If I am worthy of Your tears, just for a little while,
You will call me out of the sepulchre of this body
and You will say, 'Come out!',
so that my thoughts may not be enclosed
by the narrowness of this body,
but they may go out to Christ, be enlightened,
and I may not be concerned about the deeds of darkness
but about the deeds of light.
As a matter of fact, all those who are thinking of committing sin,
do their best to be self-centred.
Call Your servant out then.
Even though I am bound by the ties of my sins,
even though my feet are fettered as well as my hands,
and even though I am buried in the midst of thoughts and deeds of death,
if You call me out I will come out free
and I will be one of the guests at Your banquet.
Your house will be filled by precious perfume, if You care for me
after ransoming me.
(St Ambrose)

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

Let us fix our gaze on Jesus' tears, which share man's sorrow and become the voice drawing us out of our definitive deaths. Let us enjoy the hope of a Presence who is always there.

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

Let us share our experience of the Word, so that we may take each other's stones away.