

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

**Lectio n° 4
Today, an encounter**

Introduction

When confronted with sufferings and a violent death, in front of a sentence inflicted by men on other men, which inner world comes to the fore in front of us? The ways one may confront death are more than one: rejection, rebellion or the awareness of one's own errors. Authorities of the ancient world have often faced sufferings and death in a Stoic way, trying to be superior to them. In the Biblical world, on the contrary, a violent death does not highlight the mythical figure of the hero but rather, as in the Book of Maccabees, one's won adherence to the God of Israel, the Saviour, who can raise men up from death and give them back the limbs torn apart (2 M 7:9-11).

There is an evolution in the Scriptures, passing through the very emblematic figure of the Suffering Servant of Jahweh, "dying for many" (Is 53:11), and then arriving to Jesus' sharing of our weaknesses and His rejection of hate, even the hate of those who kill someone else, like in the passage we are dealing with in this present Lectio.

Luke 23:39-43 will make us approach different reactions and different affective worlds, as well as see a network of relations in the last moments of life: a relation with one self and one's own personal history; a relation with God; a relation with those who are in the same situation. The journey seems to pass also through the reactions of the two men hanging near Jesus' cross... And then comes St Luke's revelation of Jesus as the Man of forgiveness and of the 'today' of salvation, who is able to break the mechanism of hate for the enemy.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

O God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
You love all Your sons and You would like all of them to be saved:
pour on us that Spirit You consecrate Jesus with,
that Spirit You sent to bring the good news to the poor.

May You give us a grasp of the Gospel and of man,
so that we may bring Jesus to all our brothers,
helping them to meet Him, who is the one and only Saviour.

O Infinite Tenderness,
come and visit Your people
and, thanks to the blood spilt on the Cross of Your Son,
welcome each and everybody in the embrace of forgiveness;
may You give light to all those who live in darkness and doubt
and lead them to the haven of truth and peace.

O Virgin who knew how to listen, make us docile disciples of the Word.
May You invoke the Holy Spirit with us,
so that He may come down and renew the face of the earth.
Amen.
(Marco Cè)

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

Luke 23:39-43

39 One of the criminals hanging there abused Him: 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us as well.' 40 But the other spoke up and rebuked him. 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said. 'You got the same sentence as He did, 41 but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.' 42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' 43 He answered him, 'In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

Let us read the text over and over again...

This is the last part of St Luke's Gospel – 'The Fulfilment in Jerusalem' – including chapters 22-24, and dealing with Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. The main theme of St Luke's story, coupling Jesus' journey to Jerusalem with His encounters with different character all subsequently experiencing His mercy, comes to the fore in His meeting with the two criminals hanging on the crosses next to His. The context is the show put on by the people, who "stayed there watching", the leaders who "jeered at Him" and the soldiers who "mocked Him too".

The passage we are dealing with is placed by St Luke in between line 34 ("Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing") and line 46 ("Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit"), which give it its setting, ie Jesus' prayer to the Father, which is characteristic of St Luke's. Within this context of prayer and trust, lines 39-43 lead to the climax of the whole good news as well as to the fulfilment of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Each preceding offering (Lk 1:8-9) is

fulfilled here in a 'today' where man's salvation comes from 'forgiveness', 'Jesus' gift of Himself to the Father', from 'being with Jesus' in the fullness of an encounter which is the very essence of "being in His kingdom".

The 'today' of salvation had already been proclaimed to the poor in the 'infancy gospel', "A Saviour has been born to you", (Lk 2:11) and the Scripture "is being fulfilled today even while you are listening" (Lk 4:21) as He has come "to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19). And also when Jesus meets Zacchaeus (Lk 19:2) the 'today' of salvation consists in an encounter, in His entering the house of a sinner. That very 'today', which started with the birth of a Baby-God, and which was fulfilled in all those redemptive encounters, finds its climax in the passage we are dealing with: "Today you will be with me in paradise", and this is the last and complete manifestation of the Saviour.

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

- a) 23:39
- b) 23:40-41
- c) 23:42
- d) 23:43

a)

39 One of the criminals hanging there abused Him: 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us as well.'

The beginning of this passage – which has been defined 'the Gospel of the Gospel' – focuses our attention on one of the criminals. In particular, St Luke highlights the following facts:

1. He makes use of the Greek term 'kakoirgoi', 'criminal', instead of 'lestai', 'bandit', used by St Matthew and St Mark. In fact, at the time 'lestai' used to refer to the Zealots, while St Luke here makes a reference to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Is 53:12) quoted in line 22:37, where however he makes use of the term 'anomon', 'lawless', 'rebellious'.
2. St Luke defines the criminal as "hanging" (referring to Dt 21:22-23; Ac 5:30; Ga 3:13), not as "crucified with" like St Matthew and St Mark.
3. The words he utters are defined as "blasphemy": he mocks the Messianic claim of Jesus but at the same time he offends the Christ, ie God Himself. The tense used in Greek is a durative imperfect, denoting an action which lasts in time, as well as his refusal to change, and an interpersonal distance with God and with Jesus, a man who is suffering like him.
4. The keyword is 'save', which occurs five times in five lines (35-39), used by the leaders, by the soldiers and also by the man who is hanging next to Him, in order to mock Him by making use of His same arguments. "If You are the Christ, save Yourself..." Salvation should be the proof of the genuineness of the Messiah, according to the Jewish world view. From the criminal's provocation we can however deduct the feature of this kind of Jewish Messiah: he should be victorious and powerful, and should show a supernatural power. "Save Yourself and us", says the criminal... But

which kind of salvation is he referring to? Jesus' humanity reveals that the salvation He wants to deliver is not the supernatural and spectacular power which belongs to Him and which He can convey, but rather the dimension of communion with the Father as well as the dimension of prayer, present also in the last moments of His earthly life (34, 46), as St Luke aptly highlights. We can be saved, St Luke says, if we entrust ourselves to the Father through Jesus. And what about those who are "hanging" with Him? In the common suffering and fate of death, what alternative is there to the distance created by the refusal to believe and by blasphemy?

b) *40 But the other spoke up and rebuked him. 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said. 'You got the same sentence as He did, 41 but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.'*

Here St Luke adds a detail which is not present either in St Matthew's or St Mark's. The second thief entrusts his fate – after physical death – to Jesus. Among all the encounters of Jesus, through which He delivers salvation and mercy, this is the emblem of the most desperate situation of man. To this second criminal, the person of someone else "hanging" like himself does not arouse a wish to mock Him, nor a request to prove His power. On the contrary, it opens a new perspective where suffering and death do not necessarily mean 'definitive defeat'. The affective reaction of the second criminal is defined thus: 1) reproach to the first criminal; 2) awareness of his own guilt; 3) the awareness of Jesus' innocence.

- 1) The reproach is not just simply a correction, but a warning not to be devoid of fear of God. A warning with a religious connotation, similarly to the blasphemy of the first criminal. In fact, the theme of the fear of God, dear to St Luke and having its roots in Si 1:13 as well as in Psalms (112:1; 128:1), reminds us that the man who fears God can count on His mercy, and in the hour of death he will be blessed, led to the blissfulness of Heaven. On the contrary, if one does not fear God, the perspective of Judgement will become real, as in Lk 18:4 and 23:40, being dealt with once again in Ac 10:34-35, also by St Luke. "For those who fear God's name, the time has come to be rewarded" (Rv 11:18).
- 2) The awareness of one's own guilt makes one down-to-earth and opens the way to accepting the sentence and, above all, to be aware of the difference between one's own condition and Jesus', who has been hanged but has done nothing wrong.
- 3) The proclamation of Jesus' innocence on the criminal's part is related by St Luke between the statement of Pilate (23:4, 14) and the Roman centurion's at the feet of the Cross (23:47). The heathen and a criminal acknowledge the death of a just man, who has done nothing wrong, who biblically lived in conformity to God's will, who – as St Luke states in Ac 10:38 – "went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil". Not so either the religious leaders or those whose heart was darkened by the will to gain power.

c) *42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.'*

Thanks to the acknowledgement of his own situation and of the Just sentenced to death, the criminal is able to pray: “Jesus, remember me!” The imperfect tense reveals the insistence and the repetition of the request. Who is this request addressed to? The criminal does not use peculiar titles, neither ‘Kyrios’, nor ‘Christ’... There is a hidden strength in this last appeal of a man sentenced to death, an appeal only to the name of Jesus, simply to ‘Jesus’ in its very meaning: ‘God saves’.

In the last moments of life of the two criminals, the deepest truth of the second criminal in particular, and of Jesus, come to the fore. On one side the need to be saved; on the other side, the basic mission of Jesus’ life, ie to be ‘salvation’. The good thief begs Jesus to be remembered... but in the Bible to be remembered implies an action on God’s part, God’s intervention. To be remembered is what the biblical man demands from God. This demand may be either direct or indirect (as in Ps 10:12; 74:19; 106:4-5). Here Jesus is asked to remember, as He is ‘God who saves’. When? This last part of line 42 presents two variants in the Greek text: ‘eis’, meaning ‘coming into Your kingdom’; or ‘en’, ‘coming with Your kingdom’. The latter has a more eschatological meaning. However, according to the whole context of St Luke’s Gospel, the former is to be preferred, given that St Luke presents Jesus’ life as a journey towards fulfilment, a journey made up of encounters with men from the nativity to the cross, up to the encounter with the desperate poverty of a guilty man sentenced to death. Thus, the salvation promised to the shepherds at the Nativity is paradoxically fulfilled at the end of the journey. To be remembered when Jesus comes into His kingdom opens one up to a new perspective after being sentenced to death, and here trust and hope meet.

d) 43 *He answered him, ‘In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’*

Jesus, who was silent when the first criminal abused Him, as well as when Herod mocked Him, responds to the good thief’s prayer with a solemn formula: “Amen. I assure you.”

In its etymological root the Amen denotes a firm foundation. It is a word that, as a rock of faithfulness and truth, shows us Jesus-Man who is Himself that solidity that the word expresses, when confronted with His own suffering and the request of the good thief, because He is indeed rooted in the trust of the Father and wholly entrusted to His hands. When confronted with suffering and death, in his last moments of life, the Man-Jesus is inhabited by a steadfast mercy, and He can respond positively with a promise which is not generic but addressed to the very man who is begging Him: “I tell you...” And His promise is made to that specific man with his specific history.

In this encounter the Man-Jesus, after being silent in front of mockery, gives a strong and personal word which does not delay its effects, but is an immediate reassurance for him who is appealing to Him ‘in extremis’, getting rid of the other thief’s self-sufficiency and his demand for a power show.

In this encounter we can see a different view: Jesus can manifest the event of mercy and salvation which is effective ‘now’, to that man who is begging for a new perspective so that he may overcome the imminent death as well as the limited horizon of his life, disregarding whether it will be saved or lost. In this

encounter Jesus' humanity, breaking the obstinate circle of self-interest and self-preservation, which is typical of men and women finding themselves in situations of extreme danger, remains open to the other's requests and brings to the 'other side' that doleful and wounded humanity who addresses Him and becomes a friend of His.

Jesus' humanity breaks that circle of self-interest, and is ready to welcome others into His own journey to the kingdom, and to share it with them. The request to be remembered and the personal promise are fulfilled in a time of 'salvation', when a relation of communion is born: "Today you will be with me in paradise". 'Today', the time of favour of the Saviour's birth (Lk 2:11), a Saviour who comes to meet man, is renewed as a time of salvation, amidst sufferings, and as a relation of communion and of entrustment to Jesus, to Him who is in the eternal present of the Father, in the hands of the Father. This encounter of relation / communion defines a place who is not a place, 'paradise'. This term comes from Persian and means 'garden'. We get it from its translation into Latin. It reminds us of the original place of communion with God, the garden of Eden.

In the text we are dealing with, the 'today' of the opening speech of Jesus of Nazareth (4:21) is fulfilled. The promise of the "year of favour from the Lord", when being in communion with Jesus, being with Him, means indeed both salvation and the kingdom, paradise, and it is fulfilled in the text we are dealing with, when Jesus is hanging and bearing a 'malediction' upon Himself, apparently a loser.

In Lk 22:28-29, at the Last Supper, Jesus promised that a kingdom would be conferred on those who had stood by Him faithfully in His trials, just as His Father conferred one on Him. We can guess that the good thief, being open to the person of Jesus, becomes like those who have stood by Him faithfully in His trials... Each and every human prejudice is overturned, mercy becomes the new justice, and there is no limit to the number of those invited into God's communion.

2. Meditatio

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

Very often extreme conditions make the deepest truth of our being, which inhabits in the depths of our heart, come to the fore. The truth of our being creatures is that in our depths God Himself dwells... but how much do we allow Him to reveal Himself to us? How do we in our turn reveal Him to others?

In a context of common suffering, who is my neighbour? Is he a comrade, an adversary (as far as survival is concerned), or a brother that must be welcomed?

Where does the prejudice nourishing distance, our keeping apart, instead of communion, reside?

I invite you to couple the trust in the faithful and merciful God (RoL, n° 12) with the spirit of poverty (n° 17), preparing us to be attentive to our neighbours, to welcome them, to listen to them, so that we can be 'women of dialogue and of hope' even when sufferings arise. Of course there is no need to be 'wonder-women', but our lifestyle must be informed by Love.

In this respect, I find that the spiritual testament written by Fr Christian de Chergé, Prior of the Trappist Abbey of Tibihrine in Algeria and killed in 1996 together with seven monks of his community, is indeed enlightening. The story of the Tibihrine martyrs highlights the dimension of unconditional openness, turning into forgiveness, wish for communion, in the Father, whenever one is facing suffering, trying to have the same gaze of the Father instead of passing judgement... This is the path leading to the discovery of a universal fraternity, a path hidden within the Father's gaze and revealed by Jesus' mercy.

“Algiers, 1 December 1993 /
Tibihrine, 1 January 1994

If one day (and it could even be today) I should become a victim of the terrorism that seems now to want to involve all the foreigners that live in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, and my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country.

To accept that the sole Master of every life cannot be made extraneous to this brutal conflict. To pray for me: how could I be found worthy of this offering? To know how to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones that are left in the indifference of anonymity. My life does not have a higher price than any other life. It is worth no less and no more than any other life. Whatever the case, it does not have the innocence of childhood. I have lived enough to consider myself an accomplice of the evil that seem, alas, to prevail in the worlds, and also of that evil may strike me out of nowhere.

I would like, if the moment comes, to have that flash of lucidity that allows to solicit the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness of my brethren in humanity, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart those who have wounded me. I cannot hope for a death of that kind. It seems to me important to declare this. Indeed. I do not see how I could be happy at the fact that a people that I love were indistinctly accused of my murder. For what they will perhaps call the ‘grace of martyrdom’, to owe that grace to some Algerian, above all if he says that he acts out of faith to what he believes to be Islam, would be too high a price to pay.

I well know the contempt with which the Algerian taken as a whole have come to be dismissed. I also know the caricature of Islam that a certain kind of Islamism encourages.

It is too easy to put one's conscience at rest by identifying this religion with the forms of fundamentalism of its extremists. Because Algeria and Islam are another thing, they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed enough, I believe, in front of everyone, what I have received from Islam, finding in it so often the central recurrent theme of the Gospel that was learnt when I was on the lap of my mother (the whole of my first Church), specifically in Algeria, and, already then, with all my respect for Muslim believers.

Evidently enough, my death will seem to vindicate those who have seen me in precipitate fashion as being a ‘naif’ or an idealist: ‘tell us now what

you think!' But these people must know that my most piercing curiosity will be finally resolved.

Thus, God willing, I will be able to immerse my gaze in that of the Father in order to contemplate with Him His children of Islam as He sees them, totally illuminated by the glory of Christ, the fruits of His Passion, invested with the gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion, to re-establish likeness, playing with differences.

This lost life, totally mine, totally theirs: I give thanks to God who seems to have wanted it entirely for that joy, despite everything and against everything.

In these thanks in which everything is said, by now, about my life, including also you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, friends of this earth, beside my mother and my father, my sisters and my brothers, a centuple given according to the promise! And you too, friend of the last moment, who did not know what you were doing.

Yes, for you as well, I want to foresee these thanks and this 'a-dieu'. And that it may be given to us, blessed thieves, to meet again in Heaven, if God, our shared Father, so wishes, Amen! Insciallah.

Christian de Chergé,
Prior of Notre Dame de l'Atlas"

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

Lord, I would like to be one of those men
risking their lives,
giving their lives away as a gift.
What is the meaning of life, apart from being given away as a gift?
Lord, You were born in the hard circumstances of a journey;
You died as a criminal;
may You free me from my selfishness and from my 'quiet life',
so that, sealed by the sign of the Cross,
I may not be scared by a life of sacrifice...
Make me ready to take part in the beautiful 'adventure'
You called me to live:
to commit my life, Jesus, to Your word.
Help me to 'gamble' my life, Jesus, on Your Love.
The other people may be wise indeed,
but You told me to be a 'fool'.
The other people may believe in 'order',
You bade me believe in Love.
The other people are concerned with sparing their energies,
You bade me 'give'.
The other people are looking for a comfortable life,
You bade me 'walk' and be ready.
Both when I am joyful and when I am suffering,

help me Lord not to trust in me but in You:
may I 'play the Christian game'
without thinking too much about 'consequences'.
And, at last, to risk my life
relying only on Your Love.
Amen.

4. Contemplatio (to contemplate the Word / silence)

May our hearts be healed by Jesus. May He involve us in His dynamics of gift and forgiveness.

5. Collatio (to share the Word)

Let us share both the difficulties and the beauty of following Jesus, as His humanity lets us grasp.