

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

**Lectio n° 6
The joy of finding...**

Introduction

The experience of finding something that we had lost gives us the joy of finding also a part of ourselves that seemed to be missing. We are indeed a 'wholeness', a complex relation, where our beings are defined by the most basic of our relations. Joy is the sign of a re-established unity, a sign of wholeness. But what do God the Father and Jesus His mirror, care for most? Where does their joy derive from? What is the reason of Jesus' existence, of His mission, of His joy, mirroring the Father's will and joy?

In this Lectio we will consider two brief texts, suggesting and illustrating how this joy, occurring each and every time in Heaven, up to the end of time, originates from finding back the lost sheep, or from cleaning, sweeping the house in order to find the drachma. A joy which originates from God's finding us, given that we are regarded as precious, important, indispensable to the life-giving love relation between the Father and the Son, to their unity, to their being.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come, true light and joy of the soul.

Come, cloud bringing dew and inexpressible beauty.

Come, to accept our praise as fragrant incense.

Come, Spirit of Truth, which the world cannot receive.

Come, to make us taste the happiness of Your outpouring.

Come, to gladden us with the abundance of Your gifts.

Come, eternal sun without setting to establish Your abode in us.

Holy Spirit Paraclete, come and dwell in us.

(Akathistos Hymn to the Holy and Life-Giving Spirit, Ikos 1)

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

Luke 15:1-10

1 The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to Him, 2 and the Pharisees and Scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' 3 So He told them this parable:

4 'Which one of you with a hundred sheep, if he lost one, would fail to leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the missing one till he found it? 5 And when he found it, would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders 6 and then, when he got home, call together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, I have found my sheep that was lost."

7 In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance.

8 'Or again, what woman with ten drachmas would not, if she lost one, light a lamp and sweep out the house and search thoroughly till she found it? 9 And then, when she had found it, call together her friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, I have found the drachma I lost." 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance.

This passage is part of Chapter 15, and of the section relating Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, through Samaria and Judaea (Lk 9:51-19:28).

This is the very beginning of Chapter 15, including the three parables about mercy, that illustrate God's face: not just the sinner's conversion, but also God's search and His joy in finding back the sinner.

To search, to rejoice, to be merciful, are all themes typical of St Luke's. These are God's deeds and, attributed to Jesus, they reveal the hidden meaning of Jesus' journeying. In fact, in the context of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, Chapter 15 discloses a hidden feature of God's face, and makes us share its meaning: God's 'journey' / existence is aimed at looking for men and women who are far away from Him. This search will be fulfilled only in Jerusalem, God's place, the place God is taking the whole of humankind to, by consigning Himself to us. This journey leads us to open ourselves in a new way and indiscriminately – this is the universalistic approach of St Luke. Already at Chapter 14 we had seen Jesus eating at the place of one of the Pharisees' leaders (14:1). There, Jesus related of very peculiar guests, the poor, the limp, the blind... To the crowds approaching Him, He showed a new criterion of following: it is necessary to discern and to remain free, in order not to be stumbling blocks on God's path and not to hinder His work (14:26, 33), and to be His disciples.

Up to this Chapter 15 included, all of Jesus' words are uttered during meals, gatherings of communion: He is approached by tax collectors and sinners (15:1); and He will respond to the consequent complaints of the Scribes and Pharisees. In Chapter 16, Jesus will then spend a few words on faithfulness, words addressed to the disciples, and He will give instructions also on poverty, which is another of St Luke's themes. Finally, in Chapter 19, the whole meaning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem will be disclosed: to Zacchaeus, a tax collector, Jesus will say that the Son of Man has come to look for and save what had been lost.

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

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Introduction

1 The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to Him, 2 and the Pharisees and Scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

All the sinners and tax collectors were crowding around Jesus to listen to Him: He brings the good news that they were longing for but that they could not pre-figure. He is approached by those who were considered to be impure, or who at least should have been cleansed through a ritual of purification in order to be able to come close to Him and to share a meal with Him. But what is the reason of His appeal?

Perhaps it was not just because He did say beautiful words conveying new ideas, but also because His presence was altogether new, as well as His gaze (cf Lk 19:5) and His inclusive deeds. If those public sinners had listened to Jesus from a distance, the Scribes and the Pharisees could have put up with it... But to share the meal was out of discussion, given that all those who came into contact with an impure man would be contaminated. These Scribes and Pharisees were not particularly evil, as they are usually regarded, but they complained because Jesus' world view, His way of putting into practice God's Law, would destroy their certainties and, in particular, was putting at risk God's face as they saw it, and their relation with Him.

They were defending the face of God or, better, their idea of the face of God, distorted by their own imagination. It was a God "in the image of man", not vice versa, featuring human expectations and categories.

In fact, does God need to be defended? On the contrary, He needs us to be living in Him, as He is the Living-One. Complaining, literally "to murmur", denotes that they were convoluted, entrapped within their own ideas and beliefs. Their sterile norms made them incapable of seeing the person who was in front of them: the person, not a contaminating object. By complaining, they were excluded from Jesus' life, His inclusive deeds and His words.

In fact, they were not complaining because of occasional deeds on Jesus' part. The verbs that we find in this passage show that, when Jesus was not rejecting sinners and shared a meal with them, His were durative actions, repeated in time and one of His habits. Those complaining should have changed, grafting a new dimension into their religious customs, a dimension that had to do with religion, ie, the relation between God and man. This was not a sociological novelty, but a theological revolution!

It was not a question of purity, but an a-priori openness to others, changing the pious Israelites' view of God's justice, a justice that any Israelite man had to

respect and mirror in himself. But what was Jesus mirroring? “This man” (He was not worthy to be named by those complaining against Him) was practically in communion with sinners. He did not simply touch them, but He ate with them, as a sign of the eschatological banquet of the upright. This was a very deep meaning, upturning the rules and God’s very ‘face’.

To seek and to find

3 So He told them this parable: 4 ‘Which one of you with a hundred sheep, if he lost one, would fail to leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the missing one till he found it? 5 And when he found it, would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders...

Jesus did not respond directly to those complaining against Him, but He provoked them, inviting them to take side... He related two parables, one about a man and the other about a woman, who had both lost something and who searched for it and who found it...

Who is that man with a hundred sheep? “One of you”, specifies the text. This should already provoke a reaction in Jesus’ listeners. Is it really true that if one of them had 100 sheep and lost one, he would leave the 99 in the desert and went after the missing one till he found it? This was paradoxical from the very beginning. They would probably decide to look after the remaining 99 better, by making a better fold and so avoiding to lose some more.

The passage highlights a completely different perspective, with the utmost importance attributed to the lost sheep. The number is not important. What is important is to go and find the lost one. Here a disinterested search prevails over ‘economics’. The remaining 99 sheep are valuable too, but they did not get lost and they did not experience solitude and uncertainties and a lack of communion...

The shepherd’s priority is to search for the lost one. This figure has an Old Testament background. In Chapter 34, the prophet Ezekiel relates God’s message: “Disaster is in store for the shepherds of Israel... You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost” (34:2-4). “The Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it” (34:11). “I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray” (34:16). It is God, the Shepherd of Israel, speaking and intervening.

Therefore, Jesus’ listeners were able to grasp the reference to God’s action as a Shepherd... but the end of the parable was not so nice to them, because the shepherds who failed to bring back the strays were they themselves, the one complaining!

The man-shepherd, on the contrary, once he has found the lost sheep he takes it on his shoulders, “joyfully”. He does not act in line with the customs of the time, prescribing to break a leg to the sheep, so that she would not flee once again. On the contrary, this shepherd takes the lost sheep on his shoulders, thus helping her, as if she were a part of him, and joyfully, not angered or shouting abuse at her. She went very far from the fold, but he went through places very steep and

difficult to reach in order to find her. In addition to that, now he gives her her freedom, given that he does not break her leg. Will she lose herself once again?

The text hints at joy as a long-lasting feeling. God's joy is nourished by the fact that He finds us. That is His very task. We often think that we go and find Him but, in fact, this text shows that it is the shepherd who does that: He follows the lost sheep's trail till He finds her, then He rejoices about it. God is looking for us all the time, and He leaves the 99 sheep in order to go and find each of us. Jesus has come down to earth exactly to do that, ie to look for those who are lost, and is still coming down all the time, even for just one human being who belongs to Him. Yes, we belong to Him but He lets us be free, and we know Him because He loves us (Jn 10). He has been sent by the Father, and in order to find the lost sheep, He becomes the Lamb Himself, thus belonging to the flock Himself: in order to find us, He has become flesh.

Joy is the sign of a mission accomplished and at the same time of unity regained, of the re-established original communion. We have always been His, created by the Father through Him and for Him (Col 1:16), "chosen by the Father... before the world was made" (Ep 1:4), and "in Him, through His blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of sins" (Ep 1:7).

Communion of Joy

6 and then, when he got home, call together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, I have found my sheep that was lost."

7 In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance.

Can the shepherd rejoice on his own? Can Jesus rejoice on His own? The shepherd calls friends and neighbours to rejoice with him. It is the joy of a community, shared with friends, 'filein', all those who are similar to him, and neighbours.

We could say that the first and foremost affinity of communion of the Man-God is with the Trinity: when Christ brings someone back into communion, into the love circle He belongs to and from which the sheep has gone far away, the whole Trinity rejoices. Matter of factly, "there will be more rejoicing in Heaven", which biblically denotes God. However, the neighbours are called to rejoice too. Each and every creature who is in communion with God rejoices over one sinner brought back home. The home is the place of intimacy, and those who have been found go back to an intimacy of relations that had been broken... The fullness of communion involves in the joy both God and each and every creature in communion with Him. "I tell you": a promise about the future, fulfilled in the fullness of time, when each and every one that was lost will be at home.

At a woman's place

8 *'Or again, what woman with ten drachmas would not, if she lost one, light a lamp and sweep out the house and search thoroughly till she found it?*

Here Jesus deals with a peculiar form of quest, that of a woman with ten drachmas who loses one. It is a feminine dimension... Human polarity can be found in God, because man has been made in His image and likeness, "male and female He created them". The Fathers of the Church (Afraat in particular, IV century) highlighted also that out of the three divine Persons, it is the Spirit ('Ruah' in Semitic languages, where no neutral genre can be found) who bears a female name. In the most ancient Semitic literature, well before Greek influence was felt, the Holy Spirit was like a 'female' hypostasis.

Going back to our passage, this second image is simpler than the shepherd's. A woman is at home, and the lost drachma is also somewhere in the house. The woman looks for it in the house... Wherever it may be, it is well hidden. It is necessary to light up a lamp to see it, maybe by making it reflect the light. However, it is first necessary to get rid of what covers it, it is necessary to sweep out the house and search thoroughly. A great care is needed as well as great attention, because it is a very little thing that may pass unnoticed. It may have gone anywhere. It is interesting to point out that, even though it is lost, it has always been in the house. Perhaps Jesus wanted to tell us that, even though we lose ourselves, we are still in the house. We belong to God, and wherever we hide from Him, we are never out of His sight though. He is everywhere: "If I go down to Sheol, there You are" (Ps 138:8).

Adding another 'tessera' to the parable, we could say that the woman's joy comes from cleaning the house, getting rid of the dirt, sweeping the house in order to see the drachma shine, in addition to putting it back at its place with the other nine. Jesus is similar to her. He is willing to clean, forgive, pardon us, and bring us back into the Trinity's communion. This is His joy.

In the company of angels

9 *And then, when she had found it, call together her friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, I have found the drachma I lost." 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance.*

Exactly like the shepherd, the woman does not rejoice on her own. Joy is an event generating communion in the Spirit and also giving birth to a community. She calls her friends and neighbours too, so that they may rejoice with her. This is similar to what happens when one sinner repents and God's angels rejoice. The text says: "...before God's angels". This implies sight. The angels witness the finding, and the converted sinner, that is, 'found', and they rejoice. Even if the sinner is one, there is great rejoicing in Heaven. Here the verb 'to be' is in the present tense, not in the future tense as in the preceding parable, because rejoicing is happening now, and also all the time: those who are able to see, like the angels of God, can rejoice.

Already in Luke 12:8 Jesus defined the angels as those who witness the reciprocal acknowledging of Him and the disciple. Here, once again, the angels are the witnesses who are able to see and to take part in joy.

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

When we face this text, if we want to mirror ourselves in Jesus' joy, we will have to question ourselves, starting from the end of the passage instead than from the beginning:

Are we among those who are called to rejoice with Him? Which kind of witnesses are we? Are we detached or involved in joy? Why is it difficult for us to let ourselves be involved in God's joy?

First of all, we should question ourselves about our gaze. Today, are we able to see, and therefore to rejoice over the finding of one single brother or sister? Are we able to rejoice even over one single re-established relationship with God? And with no necessity to look far away, are we able to rejoice and be happy because Jesus is able to find us each and every day? We are well aware of this event, but maybe we often take it for granted, as if it were one of our own accomplishments or the natural fruit of our commitment.

Did we ever realize that we were blocked where we stood, in the awkward situations we had taken refuge into? Be we either a 'drachma' or a 'sheep', the important thing is to focus on how much we have been loved, looked for, and concretely brought back home: what does that mean to us? How do we feel when we realize that God rejoices in finding us? How can my humanity learn to rejoice with Jesus' joy, able to bring back all those who are lost? Is it necessary to be open to, to care for, to be attentive to others (as the woman in the parable)? Of course it is!

Jesus' humanity is showing us the dimension of human affectivity. The more our own affectivity becomes similar to Jesus', the more it can be in communion with God's very own ethos, with the Trinity's dimension of joy and love. But it is the Holy Spirit, the Eternal Communicator, the Spirit of Unity and Joy who can pour Himself into our hearts and make us share His joy, the very joy of Christ and of the Father.

I invite you to re-read and meditate on n° 42 of our Rule of Life.

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

Let me be part of those who celebrate with You, Lord,
not as the protagonists who have been found,
but as the joyous companions,
neighbours called to take part in the gathering of communion.
I'd like to sing, play, dance at Your rhythm, without losing a beat,
and, while whirling, bow down to the prominent guest

embarrassed by so much mirth,
in order to invite him to join the dancing,
so that his feet may forget the path of distance,
and he may remember the embrace taking him home.
I would say to him: Blessed are you, brother, that you let yourself be found.
We would not have had this celebration otherwise.
Thank you, because my joy has increased.
Then I would cheer with You, Lord,
because I have a neighbour like You,
merciful and careful!

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

Let us contemplate Jesus' joy, and let us be reached by it, so that our sight is renewed and we may become able to turn our selfishness into joy.

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

Let us break the bread of the Word and share the 'meal' of the Encounter, our celebration and our joy.