

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

Lectio n° 7 The path of joy

Introduction

How can we nourish joy in our hearts and make it increase? How can we discern whether our joy is 'journeying', is evolving in our daily lives, amidst our undecidedness, our shortcomings, our lack of satisfaction, as well as diffidence towards God who seems not to be fulfilling our expectations?

Where should we find joy as a grace, as a gift / a Presence able to transform the emptiness of man's desire – urging us to look forward – into a creative and communicative path?

The Gospel tells us that this is "feminine stuff", showing to the readers of all times the relevant experience of the women visiting Jesus' tomb towards dawn on Easter day: their joy and Jesus standing in front of them, confirming in them that new joy enabling them to be witness and to proclaim His resurrection and His new presence to the Church ('Ecclesia'). They are the first to experience the new dimension of joy.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come Holy Spirit,
gratuitous gift coming from Heaven,
embrace of God's love,
happiness for all those who feel they are loved
and touched by Your reverberation of infinite peace.

Come Holy Spirit,
You put together the fragments of joy
shattered in the hearts of men and of history;
You give a lively spirit to so many of our expectations and delusions,
fears and wishes.

Come Holy Spirit,
unquenchable spring of grace,
You carve into our hearts the Father's love's sign that cannot be erased,

so that we can fearlessly proclaim to our world
our wish to believe.

Come Holy Spirit,
poured out from Christ's pierced side,
You bring with You the awakening of Your new life,
and make us be raised to be forgiven...
Change then our hearts
so that our longing for happiness may be fulfilled.

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

Mt 28:5-10

5 But the angel spoke; and he said to the women, 'There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here, for He has risen, as He said He would. Come and see the place where He lay, 7 then go quickly and tell His disciples, "He has risen from the dead and now He is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see Him." Look! I have told you.' 8 Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell His disciples.

9 And suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus. 'Greetings,' He said. And the women came up to Him and, clasping His feet, they did Him homage. 10 Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me.'

This passage is taken from Chapter 28, which belongs to the third part of St Matthew's Gospel (The supreme fulfilment, 16:21-28:20), second section (26:1-28:20). In particular, our passage is part of the Resurrection gospel. It is the epilogue of the three announcements of Jesus' passion in the first section, an event which was difficult to grasp for the disciples.

Here we are in between: Judas' betrayal, the tribunal, Jesus' death and entombment, and the Risen One's last words to His eleven disciples.

This passage follows the women's visit to the sepulchre, and the violent earthquake which is a theophany, and the guards shaken by fear: an angel rolls away the stone of the sepulchre and sits on it. He proclaims to the women the announcement of Jesus' resurrection (in St Mark's Gospel there is a young man; in St Luke's two men).

In a way similar to that of the beginning of the Gospel, the angel has the task of interpreting the events in the light of faith; and the intuition that the women get from faith enables them to understand that Jesus' promise has been fulfilled.

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

Proclamation	28:5-6
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Proclamation

5 But the angel spoke; and he said to the women, 'There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here, for He has risen, as He said He would. Come and see the place where He lay...

“There is no need for you to be afraid.” You, not the guards who were shaken by fear. You, who followed Jesus, who came to the tomb towards dawn out of love, who wanted to stay close to Him even now... That “You” hints to the many hues of a privileged path. That “You” makes of them the protagonists as well as the addressees of a peculiar experience inviting them to change their point of view.

St Matthew makes use of two different verbs when referring to the women’s gaze: “...went to look at the sepulchre” (28:1); and “Come and see the place where He lay...” (28:6). The former denotes contemplation; the latter denotes knowledge.

The proclamation fills the gaze with a new awareness: the One who was crucified, that they followed up to the sepulchre, is no longer to be contemplated as the dead One but as the Risen One; and He is not there any longer, He is somewhere else. It is true that they went there to have a look, as it was the custom after burial, but it is especially because they are there, sitting and waiting, that the women can see and learn that the place is empty, contrary to their expectations. They are the only ones who know how to wait and who stay there. Therefore, their gaze changes and becomes able to see – in spite of the emptiness of the sepulchre – a new and different ‘presence’. Their very love becomes a bridge from the sepulchre to the other side

Mission

7 ...then go quickly and tell His disciples, "He has risen from the dead and now He is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see Him." Look! I have told you.'

Here we find a command prompting them to action: “go quickly”. There is no time to ponder things. There is an outpouring of novelty, responsibility, mission... contravening the customs of the time. According to the Law of Israel, women did count for nothing, their witness was not valid... In spite of that, the greatest event of history, unheard of in all times, must be proclaimed by them. In fact, the disciples, who in the first section of St Matthew’s Gospel did not grasp Jesus’ message, now receive a believed-in proclamation from the women.

The women believed in spite of the empty tomb. The angel tells them that He has risen from the dead. How can that be possible? The women may have wondered about it. However, they come to the conclusion that they have to believe: their love prompts them to believe that that Presence is no longer in a sepulchre. Their love gives them intuition, not an explanation of how that may occur. They have to proclaim to the disciples that they are longed for, that there is a place for them to meet Him, that they have not been forgotten, that the promise that they will see Jesus once again will be fulfilled in Galilee (cf 26:32).

The women have to hurry up, so that they can tell the disciples that the Crucified One has risen from the dead and also that they will see Him once again soon. "Look! I have told you," concludes the angel with solemnity.

There are no objections to- nor questions about the proclamation: their answer is obedience to the word that they have received, so that, starting with the women and with all those who are ready to change their point of view, the quest may turn into a proclamation (by one's very life) and into a promise of a meeting, spreading all around the country.

Awe and great joy

8 Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell His disciples.

They "came quickly away from the tomb". It is not easy to obey the order to leave what is already known and to go towards what is unknown, but the women do it quickly because they are prompted by "a great joy". "Awe and a great joy", says the text. Awe for what is perceived as 'other' and cannot be explained, and which upturns each and every of their expectations, coupled with joy, prompting them to act. This is not a paralysing terror, like the guards', because it is coupled with joy, prompting them to go beyond it. It is a live force prompting them to go, to move forward towards the fulfilment of the promise.

The sepulchre becomes a memorial, and joy is the live force moving them away from a place of death. The women are thus distancing themselves not only from a physical place, but also from their past, from the memorial of death, from the place where they had relegated the crucified Jesus into. They have to change their perspective in order to be open to the greater joy, understandably filled with awe for the unexpected events, which cannot be controlled. This joy becomes the driving force enabling them to fulfil the mission that they have received from the angel. And they wonder, 'What will the event be?'

Meeting Jesus: increased joy

9 And suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus. 'Greetings,' He said. And the women came up to Him and, clasping His feet, they did Him homage.

The further the women go from the sepulchre / memorial of death, the more forward joy drives them towards the new perspective, preparing them to welcome Jesus' new dimension, the Risen One announced by the angel.

The angel did not tell them that Jesus would meet them, but Jesus comes anyway and they recognize Him immediately. Not so in many other appearances of the Risen One... Jesus is in front of them. They are running full of awe and joy, and when they see Him they stop. The encounter is opened by His greetings: literally, "Rejoice!" Which kind of joy is that? Which kind of joy does He bring? Which kind of joy does He increase?

The same joy that they had experienced previously, during Jesus' life, finds its very roots now. By the push forward, by the present experience, Jesus is inviting them to a new steadfastness: the joy / grace that He communicates comes from

His victory over death. Joy originates from experiencing something more powerful than life itself: it is the explosion of Life outpouring with joy.

However, the women need to tread a path, given that it would be unbearable for them to come to terms in a direct way with the explosion of Life. Jesus Himself is suggesting a path for them: “rejoice”, “do not be afraid”, “go”.

In between “rejoice” and “do not be afraid” stands the women’s act of worship. They clasped His feet, those feet that had been in Sheol, as if they did not want to let Him go. Are they prostrating themselves in front of the mystery of His return?

They worship Him as a real man, not as a ghost: by worshipping Him, they recognize Him as God, as a God close to them, that can be embraced, the God of Life. And they are approaching a greater joy, the fruit of their encounter with Jesus.

Mission confirmed

10 Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me.’

Jesus did not reject their immature joy, but accompanied it, gave it time to grow by letting Himself be touched, embraced, worshipped... His speech reveals His beautiful humanity, able to build upon the original experience of the women: the affective relation and joy deriving from meeting once again.

The faithful women had followed Him along the roads of Galilee (cf Mt 27:55), up to the Cross and the sepulchre (cf 27:61). In their present worshipping, in their present clasping the Risen Jesus’ feet, there is a possibility for their joy to turn into something else. Now joy comes from God, it originates from Life, seen and touched. Now it is no longer the angel that gives them a command, now they no longer have to interpret the events in the light of faith, but it is Jesus Himself who really can say “Do not be afraid” and who can send them to His brothers. He increases their joy, drives away fear.

In this passage we find features that are typical of St Matthew’s Gospel: ‘adoration’ (referred to the Magi at the beginning of the gospel, cf 2:11; and then in 28:17); the ‘God-With-Us’ (beginning of the Gospel, cf 1:23; and end of 28:20b); ‘ecclesiality’, in Jesus’ reference to “His brothers”. St Matthew had already dealt with it in Chapter 18, but now it is fulfilled.

This last feature, ‘ecclesiality’, on one hand confirms the women’s mission; on the other hand it distinguishes the mission they received from Jesus from the mission they received from the angel. The novelty is the fulfilment of fraternity with Jesus: “...tell my brothers”. The women’s mission is the proclamation of a new age, a new relation with Jesus, and the Church. Through the annunciation to the women and the mission He gives them, Jesus Himself reveals the greater joy that all of us – not only the women – have to rejoice about: the heart of the annunciation is that a brotherhood has been established between Jesus and us (‘Jesus’ means ‘God saves’), and therefore we are children of the Father. Now the Sermon on the Mount is fulfilled. Now the ‘Our Father’ is fulfilled. The greater joy is to be brothers of the One who vanquished death, of the Living One, children of the Life-Giving Father, promoters of fraternity. Jesus, the God-Who-Saves, the

God who is close to us, makes His brothers and sisters share the new event, the explosion of Life that vanquished death. Death was the separation between the Father and Life.

2. Meditatio

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

- Once again Jesus presents Himself with a peculiar feature of His humanity: He does not kill an immature joy but nourishes it by His very presence, by being benevolent and driving the women towards a deeper experience. And what about us?

Are we women trying to nourish and serve that little joy that each and every man is trying to keep burning and to rekindle in his heart, so that he may respond to the calling of life lived to the full which is in the depths of his soul?

- Are we so shaken by fear that we are unable to grasp life moving forward, that great but hidden joy that thanks to Jesus our brother's humanity has become the joy of a daughter, of a sister, and which is trying to come to the fore?

- May we be so thick not to care for both our joy and other people's joy? May we prefer to stay in dullness? May we avoid to meet Jesus and relate to Him, whose Presence is the cause of our joy?

When we are in front of Him, there are no excuses: we cannot but recognize that our humanity has been made to rejoice, in spite of all odds. "Rejoice," he said to us. Our humanity has been made in such a way that we can experience His Presence, a Presence we are looking for even though we are not aware of doing it, a Presence hidden in so many of our needs and wishes but which is approaching us, like the women of the Gospel.

- Perhaps we should let ourselves be overcome by joy. The women who pay homage to Jesus are suggesting that we too need a silent place where we can give our consent and worship Him and "be in His presence". This place enlightens us and prepares us to that greater joy which awaits us further on along the way. We cannot grasp it, we cannot take it for granted, but it was promised to us by the One who came to meet us. From standing in front of an empty sepulchre to staying in front of a Presence.

- N° 32 of the Rule of Life seems to couple prayer, simplicity and love, so that the meeting, which is aimed at opening us to God's callings in each and every event or thing, may take place. And we are called to rejoice too!

Perhaps we should stop and listen and learn to change our point of view, and to look at things from a different perspective, "clasping His feet", being at soil level: joy comes when we suddenly realize that there is another way of inhabiting history which does not detach us from it, but makes us all one in fraternity, and makes us sisters. And that way is Jesus' very own way.

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

Lord, I agree to keep silent,
in order to be able to hear what is inaudible.
I agree to keep silent,
in order to be able to listen to a voice which is not mine only.
I agree not to demand,
in order to get as a gift an answer explaining the meaning of life.
I agree not to know,
in order to welcome a mysterious message about life.
Here I am, I am patiently listening:
Come, Lord of my life,
so that I may live my life to the full.
Come, Lord of joy,
so that I may savour joy to the full.
Come to me and to each and every man, O God.
You put in our hearts the awareness that living in Your presence
is such a great joy.

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

Let us stop, and let us leave Jesus meet us in the land of our life. Let us open up
and let us be transformed in our inner selves.
He precedes us on the path and awaits for us. We must pay attention to the little
joys, driving us towards His greater joy.

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

Exactly like the women who experienced the new presence of Jesus together, let
us share our common experience of pondering over that Word of His which is
coming to meet us today.