

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

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

### **Lectio n° 3 An issue of the heart**

We have been called to have a far-reaching sight, a heart capable of nourishing both the wish and the strength of a liberation process, together with the expectancy and the patience of a fulfilment not yet realized.

In this passage from the gospel we 'meet', together with Jesus, some symbols of lack of true life: a paralyzed hand, hardened hearts...

How many struggles are there in our lives? How many inconsistencies (both ours and other people's)?

However, even a "withered hand" that can be stretched out once again is a little sign of liberation, the sign of a journey where our relationships come back to life and we can conquer new perspectives. Let us follow the impetus of the humanity of Jesus on this path of hope.

#### **Let us invoke the Holy Spirit**

*Come, O Holy Spirit,  
and give us a big heart,  
open to Your silent and powerful Word,  
inspiring us,  
and closed to each and every petty ambition.  
Give us a big and strong heart,  
so that we may love everybody,  
serve everybody, suffer with everybody.  
A big and strong heart,  
blissful only when capable of beating in accord with God's heart.  
(Paul VI)*

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

**Mark 3:1-6**

*1 Another time He went into the synagogue, and there was a man present whose hand was withered. 2 And they were watching Him to see if He would cure him on the Sabbath day, hoping for something to charge Him with. 3 He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and stand in the middle!' 4 Then He said to them, 'Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?' But they said nothing. 5 Then He looked angrily round at them, grieved to find them so obstinate, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and began at once to plot with the Herodians against Him, discussing how to destroy Him.*

Let us approach the text...

This is Chapter 3 of St Mark's Gospel, Part 1, First Section (1:14-3:6). While enthusiasm around Jesus prevails up to 1:45, the mystery of the Messiah rejected by His enemies is the focus of 2:1-3:6.

In particular, the passage we are dealing with – the end of the first section – describes the last of five disputes between scribes, Pharisees, Herodians and Jesus. When He heals the paralytic (2:7), Jesus is regarded as a blasphemer, due to His forgiving sins. In Levi's house (2:17) He is accused of eating with sinners. In 2:18 there is a dispute on fasting. In 2:24 He is accused of picking corn on the Sabbath. Polemical discussions and rejection end up in 3:6, with the Pharisees and Herodians plotting against Him and discussing how to kill Him.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 1) Introduction 3:1-2
- 2) Being called to choose between good and evil 3:3-4
- 3) Anger and grief 3:5
- 4) Conclusion 3:6

- 1) Introduction 3:1-2

*1 Another time He went into the synagogue, and there was a man present whose hand was withered. 2 And they were watching Him to see if He would cure him on the Sabbath day, hoping for something to charge Him with.*

Jesus goes into the synagogue once again. "Another time", because He had been in the synagogue previously, as St Mark related in 1:21. Then, He had "taught with authority", and an unclean spirit had manifested himself... Now, Jesus is under scrutiny, 'parateroun'. The goal is to put Him under accusation, taking advantage of the occasion, that is, Jesus' behaviour towards the man with the withered hand, and then charging Him with the trespassing of the Sabbath Day rules.

Let us consider for a moment the Sabbath's observance. Its institution was justified by two references: Ex 20:11, and Dt 5:15. The former implied that rest is

a celebration of God's marvels as well as a contemplative imitation of His rest. The latter, by making memory of the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt, implied man's commitment against the slavery of work and of each and every oppression.

Therefore, the Sabbath's rest could be linked both to contemplation and to liberation, given that it was a God-given command. But His precepts could be disregarded when man had stringent vital needs.

Then, is a withered hand to be cured on the Sabbath? Is the Sabbath really trespassed by the cure? Is it a vital need for the man to be cured? What does it mean to have a withered hand or, better, 'dead' and 'lifeless', according to the Greek text?

Apparently, that man cannot act freely, he is prevented from doing that. The Sabbath's rest, given by God to make memory and to experience the liberation from oppression, would become a new burden for this man, on top of the daily burden (inactivity) he already had to bear. His inability to act becomes the symbol of self-centredness, of the inability "to be open-handed with the brother", as Dt 15:7-11 requests, of the inability to give, of a diminished life, paralyzed, withered. Matter-of-factly, Dt 7 orders: "Do not harden your heart or close your hand against that poor brother of yours".

Here we find a closed hand... and maybe another hardened heart, in addition to the hardened hearts of Jesus' accusers.

2) Being called to choose between good and evil 3:3-4

*3 He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and stand in the middle!' 4 Then He said to them, 'Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?' But they said nothing.*

Jesus' call breaks the silence created by the inquisitive eyes. In fact, He does not wait for the attack to occur, but He addresses the man immediately. It is a strong call. It is a call to get up and stand in the middle. By that, does He simply want people to pay attention to the healing? Is it a good show? "In the middle" is not only a place where the man can be visible; it is indeed the centre, the focal point, the point everybody is compelled to look at, and where the inquisitive eyes must converge. In that place everybody has to change perspective on the Sabbath, starting from that man taken as an example. It is indeed the place where one can discern not just between what he can or cannot do on the Sabbath Day, but in a more relevant way, between doing or not doing good, the latter being equal to doing evil on the Sabbath Day. The issue is not whether to heal on a Sabbath Day or not, but rather the deep meaning of the Sabbath Day: God's rest must not be 'translated' as 'laziness', but as 'activity of blessing and sanctification, liberation from evil' prompting man to do good, and to perform liberating actions.

The man with the withered hand makes us come to terms with a situation of 'slavery', the situation of a man who needs to be freed in order to be able to live, in order to be able to go out of his prison and closeness to the brother; the

situation of a man who needs to go back to openness from a withered life. There must be a change of perspective in all those who are ready to accuse Jesus: but they are not capable of that, they are not capable of standing in that symbolic centre, “in the middle”, and of welcoming questions. They do not answer Jesus’ question. They keep silent. This is rendered in Greek by St Mark with the verb ‘siopao’, which is different from ‘sigè’ and highlights their dumbness, something involuntary, their inability to speak. The accusers are speechless...

### 3) Anger and grief 3:5

*5 Then He looked angrily round at them, grieved to find them so obstinate, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out and his hand was restored.*

Jesus looks at them, but His gaze is full of anger: He “looks round”, given that they are spread all around Him, they are not centred, and not only in a spatial sense. On the contrary, the man is “in the middle”, the focus of the question. The Italian translation says that Jesus was indignant, but the Greek text uses the term ‘orgè’, ‘anger’, which occurs in Hosea (5:10; 11:9; 14:4) and Isaiah (5:25 etc), as attributed to God.

In fact, Jesus’ anger is coupled with a great sadness or grief (‘sullupeomai’), because their hearts are hard. St Mark uses the word ‘porosei’ to express the idea of hardness: it is a term derived from ‘poros’ which is a kind of stone. The same term will be used by St Mark in 6:52 and 8:17, with reference to the disciples and their hardened hearts. A hardened heart is also to be found in Ez 2:4, where the Lord sends the prophet to those with a hardened heart.

In the text we are dealing with Jesus has been sent exactly to those whose hearts are impenetrable to His words, actions, and to His question on the illicitness of doing good on the Sabbath Day. They make God’s promise to Ezekiel – “I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead” (36:26) – sound false... They make the Sabbath Day, given by God for man’s joy, void... They make God’s word void, still thinking of being its defenders... But God does not need to be defended. He rather needs to be incarnated. The Sabbath Day has been given to man so that he may imitate God. The Sabbath Day’s rest should be observed by making God present... Who is imitating Him? Could God command to abstain from doing good?

Jesus’ humanity reacts in a very strong way to the distortion of the Sabbath Day – the day of joy turned into a legal cage. And He orders the man to stretch out his hand. The impetus of anger comes from the will to overcome the withered hand and, above all, the heart which, according to the Bible, is not the seat of sentiments but the decisional centre, the core of the sentient, intelligent and free personality, as well as the place where God can act.

Grief reveals an aspect of anger: it is not a ‘vengeance’ but the extreme attempt to uncover the distance of the hearts and of their decisions, from God’s heart and

from His wish for good for all His stubborn children, from His wish to be able to act in their hearts.

Jesus' humanity expresses the strength of the impetus of His and His Father's love, who suffers and compromises Himself with man in order to make him capable of letting his heart of stone be turned into a heart of flesh, the place where God can act, and thus being able to celebrate the Sabbath Day.

“Stretch out your hand”: here, God's command to Moses resounds. It was given to him eight times so that he could be able to operate with God's power in the process of liberation from Egypt.

The man stretched it out and it was “restored to its preceding state”, thus the Greek text says. The text does not repeat the term ‘terapon’.

In fact, to the healed man that means being able to open it once again, to stretch it out with all its symbolism that, according to the quote from Dt 15:7-11, involves his heart too, as well as his process of liberation and his Sabbath Day.

#### 4) Conclusion 3:6

*6 The Pharisees went out and began at once to plot with the Herodians against Him, discussing how to destroy Him.*

The Pharisees and the Herodians go out to discuss how to destroy Him. Their hearts are not capable of absorbing the Law, which remains an external code. They “discussed”... More than once this formula is used in the Gospels, but always with reference to trying to find occasions for condemning Jesus to death. The hardened hearts walk along death's path, instead of along a liberation path that leads to the celebration of the Sabbath Day.

Jesus did not shy away from the fight: yes, His anger was coupled with grief because He knew that His gesture would make the Pharisees' and Herodians' rejection more extreme and stubborn, and His death would be closer.

In spite of all that, the covenant of the new heart, proclaimed by Ezekiel and witnessed by Ps 51:12, will be inaugurated by the gift of Jesus' life (Mt 26:28), by His pierced heart (Jn 19:34), and the Apostles will proclaim its fulfilment (Rm 5:5). Anger is part of that path to salvation, and enters the history of liberation, the Sabbath Day of man.

‘Time’, considered in a general sense, refers to fullness as an expression of the horizon opening up in front of us; and ‘moment’ is the expression of the limit deriving from living in a limited space... From that derives the first principle that makes a people grow: time is superior to space...

We should give pride of place to those actions that generate new dynamism in society, and we should involve in them other people and groups which will be able to make them advance further on, till they bear fruit as relevant events of history. We should not be anxious, but clear-minded and tenacious.

I sometimes wonder who, in the present world, really cares for starting processes of growth that may build up a people, instead of getting immediate results

producing an easy, swift but little-lasting political heritage, results not conducive to human fulfilment. History will judge them according to the criterion stated by Romano Guardini: “The only criterion to successfully evaluate an epoch is to ponder how much the fulfilment of human existence is fully realized in it as well as how much it has reached its very *raison-d’être*, in accordance with the peculiar character and the possibilities of the same epoch.”

This criterion is very appropriate for evangelization, which needs taking into account the horizon, and to adopt the relevant processes and a long journey... (EG, 223-225).

## **2. Meditatio**

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

The commitment to reveal in our own humanity God’s liberating love invites us to discern how much our own hearts let themselves be moulded by His action. If the ultimate reference is the Father’s imitation, and more concretely the imitation of Jesus’ humanity, must anger also, His very anger, be part of us?

Perhaps we would not lack the impetus to fight against legalism, but would we be able to grieve on a stubborn heart? And what if those stubborn hearts were our own? Stubborn hearts because the impulsive anger has obscured the very possibility of suffering for those with a “hardened heart”.

“I want it all and now”: this is the drive for our wills to walk on the path to fullness and to what is right, blurred in the distance, but it must be converted into a long-term journey, a series of moments making up in time a chain of evolution, of constant growth, coupling the tension to fullness with our own and other people’s shortcomings.

The Holy Spirit, poured into our hearts, will rekindle in us Christ’s steadfastness and determination... We will still have to wonder whether we are ready to expose ourselves in order to start “processes of growth”, as Pope Francis would put it, processes of liberation... letting ourselves be involved by the Holy Spirit’s courage and always referring straightaway to Holy Scripture, with no biases, in order to grasp God’s calling and His love (n° 32, Rule of Life).

## **3. Oratio**

**(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

Help me, Lord, to start journeying,  
leaving aside what paralyzes me,  
leaving aside what makes me a slave,  
leaving aside what breaks my heart in two.

Help me, Lord, to start journeying,  
trying not to justify me when I can see no fruit,  
trying not to justify me when my strength seems to abandon me,  
trying not to justify me when I'm not gratefully thanked.

Help me, Lord, to start journeying,  
getting rid of all that prevents me from following You,  
getting rid of all timidity and lack of courage,  
getting rid of all my pride.

Help me, Lord, to start journeying,  
proclaiming Your Kingdom to the sorrowful,  
bringing the Good News to the discouraged,  
feeding all the hopeless with Your Word.

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

May our hearts be freed by the Spirit of the liberating Christ, so that our lives may  
'breathe freely', being simple and liberating in their relationships.

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

Let us share our own experience of the Word with the freedom of the children of  
God.