

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

Lectio n° 6 Overturning

Is it possible for those who do not 'elbow' others to own? Is it possible for those who do not impose their views on others to build freedom? Is it possible for happiness to dwell where there is no laboured conquer?

God reigns over the opposite of what is typical of man, but which is not really his fulfilment. Commonplaces must be overturned, if we want to find man's truth, as well as the truth of his relationship with God and with his brothers and sisters.

This overturning is a gift, a new perspective we can have a glimpse of in Jesus' life. Let us approach Him, so that we can hear His surprising statements...

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Come, Holy Spirit,
into our hearts,
and kindle in them the fire of Your Love.*

*Come, Holy Spirit,
and through the intercession of Mary who knew how to contemplate,
ponder in her heart and make memory of her Son's events by her love and deeds,
give us the grace to read and re-read the Scriptures,
so that we can make memory of Christ's events by our active love and deeds too.
Holy Spirit, give us the grace of being nourished by those events and of re-living
them in our own lives.*

*And give us – we pray You – an even greater grace than that:
to be able to grasp God's deeds in the Church visible and working in history,
so that we may contemplate in her – and in the early Church in particular –
the presence of God's mercy in Jesus,
who became flesh among us men in our history.*

(Card. Carlo Maria Martini)

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

Matthew 5:1-4

1 Seeing the crowds, He went onto the mountain. And when He was seated His disciples came to Him. 2 Then He began to speak. This is what He taught them:

3 How blessed are the poor in spirit; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

4 Blessed are the meek; they shall have the land as inheritance.

Let us approach the text...

This passage is taken from Chapter 5. It is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29), in the second part of St Matthew's Gospel (4:17-16:20), first section (4:17-11:1).

Great crowds were following Jesus from Galilee, from the Decapolis, from Jerusalem, from Judaea and from Trans-Jordan. Jesus had already started preaching: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand." (4:17)

The sudden entrance of the Kingdom, and even its approach, must provoke a change. The first revolution occurred in the life of four fishermen who, after meeting Jesus, followed Him, changed the course of their lives. They followed Him, they walked after Him, they changed their direction. They were the witnesses of the effects of the approaching Kingdom, of the beginning of repentance: this is the reason why Jesus could go "round the whole of Galilee" with them and "teach in their synagogues". Indeed, they were themselves the proclamation of the beginning of the Kingdom.

In fact, Jesus proclaims His gospel and heals. The approaching Kingdom is also His healing presence.

Great crowds followed Him: what was happening under their very eyes? What would God's entrance into man's history mean for them?

Yes, whether we are or we aren't aware of that, repentance overturns this world's criteria by Jesus' presence. He may be welcomed or not but, anyway, the good news is taking place, and God is at work in space and time in Jesus' flesh and actions. That is a great joy for us, we are happy because we see God's promises fulfilled.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- a) On the mount Mt 5:1-2
- b) How blessed Mt 5:3
- c) Meekness and inheritance Mt 5:5

a) On the mount

1 Seeing the crowds, He went onto the mountain.

The mountain is a little hill near Capernaum, not a real mount. However, St Matthew wants to highlight that the event occurs in a place which – Biblically speaking – is THE place of man's encounter with God.

And when He was seated...

Jesus is not speaking as a rhetorician, while standing, but as a master, while being seated, that is, from a position of authority, to His own disciples “who came to Him”. This master does not report other people’s words but, according to the Greek text, “opens His mouth”, speaking His own words and proclaiming His own ideas. From the mountain, from the place of man’s encounter with God, from the man Jesus come a very personal teaching: it is God Himself who comes to the fore and speaks. Thanks to this encounter, as well as to the listening disciples (the fruit of the first encounter with Jesus the Man), a new reality will open itself up. In it, the various situations of life will be overturned.

b) How blessed

3 How blessed are the poor in spirit; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Jesus’ words are a declaration, a good news, a direct consequence of 4:17, of the approaching Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom is being fulfilled, because God cares for man: the king, in Biblical culture as well as in the culture of ancient Eastern countries, is the one who cares and protects the weak. Kingdom of Heaven, Kingdom of God, is another way of telling that God reigns. A direct consequence of that is the ‘makaria’, (from ‘mak’, ‘long, ample’, and ‘charis’, ‘favour, gift, care’; and connected to the Haccadic term ‘magaru’, ‘to grant favours’) that Jesus proclaims, ie blessedness for man.

Yes indeed, the ‘beatitude’ / ‘blessedness’ is an objective reality, not a feeling. It is a reality resulting from a divine act which is being fulfilled under everyone’s gaze. In Jesus, God takes care of the poor, as well as of other disadvantaged classes of people, exactly as the prophet Isaiah announced in 61:1-2: “He has sent me to bring the news to the afflicted, to soothe the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison, (...) to comfort all who mourn...” The normal situation is overturned. God cares FOR the poor out of His very nature: He is simply so, He cares for the poor not because of the religious merits of the poor, but because He cares for all those who have no one else to care for them. In fact, each and everybody is poor, in some way or other... God is coming to meet the poor, each kind of poverty... That is being fulfilled in Jesus.

The beatitude fulfils what it declares; its truth is based upon the authority of the speaker; it comes into human history through Jesus’ paschal path. It is a declaration of what is truly being fulfilled in the disciples who are following Jesus, and who have a share in the Kingdom of Heaven beforehand: they experience God’s intervention in human history through Jesus, up to His definitive intervention of care and liberation in history, the Resurrection.

The verbal form, the indicative, shows that blessedness is not something that has yet to be revealed, but a matter of fact the disciples must act in harmony with, in harmony with the Kingdom, with God’s action as it is taking place.

In order to be in harmony with it, they must transform themselves, act like Jesus does, be overturned. Poverty is not a social condition but a filial attitude: it

implies welcoming God's as well as Jesus' care and, at the same time, taking care of others like They do. This poverty / sharing makes us blessed and sharing God's very blessedness, as well as sharing God's intervention in the world now.

c) Meekness and inheritance

4 Blessed are the meek; they shall have the land as inheritance.

In each beatitude Jesus highlights a different aspect of poverty. The meek are blessed. Who are the meek? Psalm 37 provides some answers: the meek put their trust in the Lord, put their hope in Him and keep to His path, stay quiet before Him, do not get heated over the wicked and so on... In particular, Jesus' statement quotes Ps 37:11: "...the poor will have the land for their own".

The verb is in the future tense, because this is a promise on God's part, going back to the promise to Abraham and his descendants, "I give this country..." (Gn 15:18). But the meaning of the promise has evolved. As St Paul states in Ga 3:16, "the words were not 'and to his progenies' in the plural, but in the singular, 'and to your progeny', which means Christ". Christ is the true heir, given that He is the son of the promise. In fact, an inheritance is not conquered but given and received. The promise is given to the believers through faith in Jesus Christ, who makes them children of God (cf Ga 3:22).

The meek, therefore, are those who are at peace, who do not have to get angered and shout to get the land, given that the land has been given to them as a promise of an inheritance.

Of course, the meaning of 'land' is not limited to the geographical territory. To own the land means also not to be a slave, it means freedom, and also liberty to live life to the full. The meek are blessed because God is caring for them, gives them the inheritance... He regards them as children! He gives them liberty and fulfils their lives.

St Matthew highlights two important points: "Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29); and "Take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world." (Mt 25:34)

If shouldering our yoke means taking Jesus as our master and following Him, learning from Him and being transformed in Him, the heritage prepared for us conveys the idea of a fulfilled life.

In addition to that, if we read the beatitude of the meek in an Easter perspective, we can say that not only is Jesus the model for the meek, but also that He changes all those who are learning from Him, given that through the gift of the Spirit – a paschal fruit – He makes all those who adhere to Him children of God and heirs.

With St Paul we can say that we are co-heirs (cf Rm 8:14-17) and that the Spirit is "the pledge of our inheritance" (Ep 1:14), an eternal inheritance that we can receive even now.

We must also remember, in a paschal perspective, that meekness is a fruit of the Spirit (Ga 5:22), not a moral or psychological feature.

This is just the opposite of what we should imagine: the beatitude of meekness prompts us not to passively wait for an inheritance but to live in the active power of the Spirit, and to act so that the inheritance and the freedom of the children of God and the fullness of life may start growing even now, anticipating and building a good land of fraternity with everyone and for everyone. “Anyone who is wise or understanding among you should from a good life give evidence of deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom.” (Jm 3:13)

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

- How should we regard Jesus’ meekness? It is not indeed a human meekness or humbleness, and the Spirit is the only One who can help us in our weakness.

- We do not know how to pray, and the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf crying to the Father, because the Holy Spirit of the Son is the only one who can make us adoptive children.

- To long for meekness is at the same time a cry for help and a social vocation. Prayer becomes the place where a deep meekness is conceived and nourished: that deep meekness is not our own, out of our own capabilities. However, it may be the place where we let ourselves be moulded by all that we cannot reach by our intelligence but that we can see by our heart’s gaze, and keeping that gaze in Jesus’ quiet and serene gaze, inviting us not to be afraid, not to defend ourselves till death, and to trust in the Father and in Him, and to be quietened in our deep selves.

From ‘The Christ meek and humble in heart’ by Martin Neyet:

Meekness can be achieved through constant prayer, as well as through the accompaniment of the Fathers, and the discovery of equanimity and compassion, fruit of Jesus’ following, up to the Cross. (...)

Jesus’ words, ‘Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened’, is interpreted by the Gaza Fathers as an invitation to incessantly make memory of God. (...)

In his Letter n° 20, after advising the Hegumen John “to make meekness rest in [his] heart”, Barsanouphios adds: “...making memory of the sheep and of the guiltless Lamb, Christ”.

This memory is possible through the constant prayer of the Name of Jesus: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me...”; “Lord Jesus, come to my help”. The memory of God impregnates the whole life of the monk, with its readings, psalms and work. The reference to the meek and humble in heart Master is constant. (...)

It would be a nonsense to believe that meekness can be imposed upon somebody or upon the self. The aggressive passions, sent away or repressed, consciously or unconsciously, would reappear at the first conflict.

Meekness is a space of grace given to us, a virginal place inhabited by the Holy Spirit, transforming everything. Meekness opens us up to love. In the same way as the incessant memory of God, it implies interior as well as exterior docility. (...) It leads us to peace, joy, the inheritance of the promised land. It needs undoubtedly equanimity and compassion.

From 'In praise of meekness' by Norberto Bobbio

As far as the two abstract names are concerned, 'gentleness' and 'meekness', designating the respective virtues, I would say (but this is more of an impression than a belief, given that I am not making a formal speech) that meekness goes down more deeply than gentleness. Gentleness remains more on the surface. Or rather, meekness is active, gentleness is passive. Again, gentleness is more an individual virtue, meekness more a social virtue. Social in the sense Aristotle distinguished the individual virtues, such as courage and temperance, from the social virtue par excellence, justice, which is a good disposition towards others (while courage and temperance are good dispositions only to our benefit).

Gentleness is a disposition of the soul of the individual, and it can be appreciated independently from the relationship with others. The gentle are quiet people, who are not easily offended, who live and let others live, who do not react to gratuitous evil, because they accept the daily dose of evilness, so to speak, not because they are weak.

On the contrary, meekness is a disposition of the soul which can shine only when in presence of somebody else: the meek man is needed by somebody else in order to overcome evilness within himself. The meek man is a tranquil man, but not prone to others... The meek man does not keep grudges, does not take vengeance, does not hate anybody. He does not think any longer about the offences he has received, and he neither rekindles hate nor reopens ancient wounds. In order to be at ease with himself, he must be first at ease with others.

Meekness is not a kind of 'tristitia', 'sadness'; but rather, a kind of 'laetitia', 'happiness', regarded as the path leading from a worse to a better perfection. The meek man is full of mirth, because he is intimately convinced that the world he is longing for will be much better of the one he is living in, and prefigures it in his daily life, by exercising the virtue of meekness, even though he is aware that the world he is longing for does not exist here and now, and perhaps will never do. (...)

As a way of relating to others, meekness is very akin to tolerance and respect for other people's ideas and lifestyle. (...)

The meek man does not pursue reciprocity: meekness is a disposition towards others which does not need to be reciprocal in order to be revealed in all its greatness. (...)

I would like to be a meek man. But I am not one. I am too often a prey to rage and cannot regard myself as a meek man. I love meek people, yes, because they make this place a good place to live in.

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

*What Your meekness is, O Lord?
I cannot recognize it, it is impossible for me,
unless You fix Your merciful gaze on me.
I do not know Your meekness, Lord,
but You proclaim me blessed anyway.
Perhaps one of Your words is enough
to transform my heart
and to find rest.
Yes, on Your word
I believe I am blessed
and I want to walk on a good soil
perfumed of peace,
perfumed of fraternity,
perfumed of eternity.
Send Your Spirit once again
to put into my heart
the seal of Your meekness,
so that Your word may be fulfilled now,
may be fulfilled always, may be fulfilled in me.*

4. Contemplatio (to contemplate the Word / silence)

May Jesus reveal at least some of the meekness of His heart. May this desire gush forth from our hearts. Let us wait in all trust and hope, and disclosing to Him what in our lives needs to be healed.

5. Collatio (to share the Word)

Let us share our own experience of the Word with charity and openness to the other, in the awareness that we are not the only owners of truth and that the sisters must not be 'conquered'.