

BIBLICAL PAGES

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

Lectio n° 7 A non-violent King

“Once upon a time there was a king...” No, this is not one of the stories they used to tell us when we were children; and our King does not come from ancient times and He does not live in a castle. He is King forever (cf Lk 1:32-33); He is King today as He was yesterday (cf Heb 13:8); and He is of a different kind from kings we are used to. He is a King who serves, gives His life, dwells in each of us and makes each of us a king. Perhaps we could say that meekness is the feature this King presents Himself with, but we should add that that feature is the king’s gift making kings all those who receive it. A meek King who can give us self-control, a power with no violence allowing us to preserve intact the identity of Love when we are confronted with evil.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Come, Holy Spirit of God!
You, who gather us around Christ’s Word,
open our minds and hearts,
so that the breath of God in us may be revived,
and You yourself may instruct us
as the perfect Gift,
and let us grasp, enjoy, love
the meek Lord of history,
and be in communion with Him.
Do not let us read just words,
but let us hear the voice of the Beloved,
coming once again into our ‘Jerusalem’.*

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

Matthew 21:1-11

1 When they were near Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage on the mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, 'Go to the village facing you, and you will at once find a tethered donkey and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, "The Master needs them and will send them back at once." ' 4 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet:

*5 Say to the daughter of Zion:
Look, your King is approaching,
humble and riding on a donkey
and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.*

6 So the disciples went and did as Jesus had told them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, then they laid their cloaks on their backs and He took His seat on them. 8 Great crowds of people spread their cloaks on the road, while others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in His path. 9 The crowds who went in front of Him and those who followed were all shouting:

*Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is He who is coming in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heavens!*

10 And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil as people asked, 'Who is this?' 11 and the crowds answered, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Let us approach the text... This is Chapter 21, first section (16:21-25:46) of the third part (16:21-28:20) of St Matthew's Gospel. This section contains three prophecies of the Passion (16:21; 17:22; 20:17), followed by instructions to the disciples. Chapter 18, with its question ("Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?"), opens St Matthew's Discourse on the Church, where the basics are: brotherly correction, prayer and getting back the brothers who have gone astray. The disciples are following Jesus but they do not understand Him. In fact, after the third prophecy of the Passion, someone is still concerned with getting the first seats in the coming Kingdom. Here (20:25ff) Jesus deals very clearly with the question of chapter 18, and specifies the features of leadership: anyone who wants to become great must be the others' servant, and must not lord over them. In fact, he must be their servant and, indeed, their slave, just as the Son of Man did.

Jesus and His disciples resumed their journey to Jerusalem. While they were leaving Jericho with a huge crowd following them, two blind men acclaimed Jesus as 'the Son of David'. Jesus stopped and felt pity for them and healed them. They would follow Him, as symbols of the disciples endowed with sight, while His own disciples, who believed they could see, couldn't grasp His message. However, both kinds of disciples would witness Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as a sign that the kingdom of the Humble Man had been inaugurated.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

Mission and instructions	21:1-3
From the Scriptures	21:5
The donkey and the cloaks	21:6-8

Acclamation	21:9
Conclusions	21:10-11

Mission and instructions

1 When they were near Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage on the mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, 'Go to the village facing you, and you will at once find a tethered donkey and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, "The Master needs them and will send them back at once." '

When they were near Jerusalem, Jesus sent two disciples to the village. The verb used is 'apostello', the same that St Matthew makes use in 10:5, where Jesus is sending the Twelve to proclaim that the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand. In that missionary chapter both the mission and the proclamation are linked to an ethos, to extreme sobriety and to gratuitousness: "You received without charge, give without charge" (10:8).

In the passage we are dealing with (21:1-3), two disciples are sent to the village facing them. Why two? A first reason could be that, in-between the first and the second mission, there is chapter 18 and the ecclesial discourse, where Jesus states: "Where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them" (18:20). Another reason could be that a testimony, in order to be regarded as valid, should be given by two witness. Consequently, the two disciples going to the village can be regarded as reliable by its inhabitants, and they can rely on the fact that, by representing the community gathered around the Master, He is in fact with them. The village symbolically represents a limited environment, not open to what comes from outside. Perhaps it will not be easy for the disciples to carry out their unusual mission, but they will have to find a tethered donkey and a colt, they will have to untie them and take them to Jesus, given that "the Master needs them but He will send them back..."

"Untie the donkey..." To untie those who are destined to bear burdens; to untie those who are destined to labour in time of peace or, better, as Isaiah states, the donkey is freed in the time of the advent of the Verb of God: "You will be happy to sow where there is water / and to let the ox and donkey roam free" (Is 32:20). The disciples, exactly as in the first mission of 10:5, obey Jesus' command. But in a way different from 10:5, they prepare a new proclamation of the Messianic Kingdom, by announcing the advent of the Messianic peace. This Messianism is not equal to stealing: the donkey and the colt will be sent back to their owners. But the Lord needs them. Why?

From the Scriptures

4 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet:

*5 Say to the daughter of Zion:
Look, your King is approaching,
humble and riding on a donkey*

and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.

To bring Jesus a tethered donkey, which was tied, so that He could ride her, is a reference to royalty. It refers to Genesis 49:10 when, while giving his blessing, Jacob entrusts Judah with the sceptre and the ruler's staff, saying: "He tethers his donkey to the vine" (Gn 49:11). The tethered donkey is a reference to the One who is to come "until tribute be brought Him" (49:10). In spite of all that, this royalty has nothing to do with power, rule and strength. To tie, to untie, become symbolic actions respectively of the reference to the royal dynasty and of the proclamation of a time of peace.

St Matthew, like St John, stresses Zechariah's prophecy (Zc 9:9): the donkey highlights a different modality for triumph. Which Messianism, which royalty is being accomplished in Jesus? This King will not have the apparatus of historical kings (the horse, fiery war animal) but will come "humble and riding on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden". Zechariah's prophecy goes on like this: "He will banish chariots... the bow of war will be banished, He will proclaim peace to the nations" (Zc 9:10). Those lines are not quoted by St Matthew.

If we re-read Zephaniah – in the Lord's promises to the nations – we see that meekness and humbleness are not just features of the king, but of the whole "humble and lowly people" (Zp 3:12), of the remnant of Israel who is faithful to the Lord and confides in Him.

Psalm 45, the royal / nuptial psalm, shows the Bridegroom King riding on "in the cause of truth, gentleness and uprightness" (Ps 45:4). Both the Judaic and the Christian traditions interpret this psalm as a reference to the marriage of the king-Messiah with Israel, a figure of the Church. Then, let us go on: who is entering Jerusalem? A King bringing peace, a meek King, a Bridegroom King. His meekness is His nuptial gift, and meekness is helpful to enter in communion with His people. Meekness makes the Bridegroom King advance together with truth and uprightness.

We can see that the Scriptures presents a Messianism which has nothing to do with the Zealot attitude, imagining a violent fight to establish David's kingdom against the Roman oppressors.

The donkey and the cloaks

6 So the disciples went and did as Jesus had told them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, then they laid their cloaks on their backs and He took His seat on them. 8 Great crowds of people spread their cloaks on the road, while others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in His path.

The donkey is a beast of burden. She was brought to Jesus together with the colt by the disciples, who laid their cloaks on their backs in order for Him to take His seat on them. This time the burden which the donkey has to bear is a non violent, not warring King. The meek King who is about to enter the city is not an oppressor; He is a burden, but a "light burden" (Mt 11:25). He does not make use

of violence; in fact, He promises peace, counting on a different power which breaks the loop of action-reaction, as well as the loop of evil by His goodness. The burden that He has to bear is a kind of peace that other people cannot understand, established not by the bow but by the gift of His life: “Anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant... just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:26-28).

It is necessary for the disciples to lay down their lives, if they want to enter with the Master who is offering His. The disciples lay their cloaks... Given that the cloak is the symbol of the person, this is equal to submitting one’s life, to offer it. But the cloak is also a reference, once again, to the royal symbols of Israel: in 2 Kings 9:13, Elisha anoints Jehu king, “whereupon they all took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps”, exactly as the crowd does with Jesus. Here we see the features of a royal entrance, but the entrance of a non-violent King, an entrance where meekness triumphs, regarded as gift of the self in alternative to lordship over others. In His time and in His vital space, but still going beyond His time and space and becoming universal, Jesus shows us the one and only way one can be king according to God’s will. We are shown a human path with no room for lordship over others, but which is an alternative to it, with its concrete giving of the self as a gift, and by being stripped of the self.

If at the entrance into Jerusalem, offering one’s cloak means being a disciple, involving one’s life with the Master’s, later on, in the heart of Jerusalem, everything will be different: the meek King will be stripped of His cloak and a scarlet cloak of a Roman soldier – a symbol of violence – will be put on Him (cf Mt 27:28). In the Passion in the holy city, His royalty will be mocked: “Hail, King of the Jews!” (Mt 27:29).

Everyman cannot accept that a king could reign without lording over the people, without violence. You, Jesus, must not be a king... Jesus, the meek man, in His passion is covered – in order to justify the normality of violence – with a cloak of violence, which is the one and only way Power understands a kingdom. If the cloak symbolically represents the person, the scarlet one which we see in Jesus’ passion does not represent Jesus. The appearance of royalty, the aesthetics of power and violence are definitely inconsistent with Him. On the contrary, Jesus is showing in His passion, up to the very end, His different royalty, and the lordship of meekness while affirming His own identity: “Are You the king of the Jews?” “It is you who say it” (Mt 27:11).

Acclamation

*9 The crowds who went in front of Him and those who followed were all shouting:
Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is He who is coming in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heavens!*

Now let us go back to line 9. The crowd shouts “Hosanna!”, that is, “Bring salvation!” This shout, preceding and following Jesus, quotes Psalm 118:26, a

hymn for the Feast of Shelters, sung while the people, branches in hand, processed to the Temple. The shout was a ritual acclamation to which the priest replied by giving his blessing: “Blessed in the name of the Lord is he who is coming!” (Ps 118:26) The shout turns into praise to the one who has been promised, awaited for, the Son of David, the King: “Bring salvation!” But do they really want to be saved by a king of peace, by a non-violent king? Is the crowd aware of what they are saying? Nowadays it is evident that we do not accept a disarmed power. The crowd of Jesus’ times would not accept it either. They were expecting the liberation from Roman rule and a new age of freedom. “Give us salvation!” “Help us!” But in front of them stands a King who advances thanks to meekness. The crowd is not realizing that they are in fact praising a modality of salvation that later on they will disown and mock. That shout, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”, shows a different face of the Lord, and presents a different modality of salvation.

To become part of this King’s retinue, to be saved by Him, is not easy.

Conclusions

10 And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil as people asked, ‘Who is this?’ 11 and the crowds answered, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

There is a very stark contrast between the enthusiasm of the crowd and Jerusalem’s reaction to Jesus’ entrance. Jerusalem “was in turmoil” or, more exactly, was shocked. The Greek term used by St Matthew is ‘eseiste’, which means ‘shattered by an earthquake’. It is the same shock of Jerusalem at the news brought by the Magi that there was a “king of the Jews”, at the very beginning of St Matthew’s Gospel. But why was Jerusalem shocked by a possible king of the Jews? They were thinking of the overturning of the status quo, they were afraid of the zealot camp, and also of so many fake messiahs and the turmoil they generated... Who is this one? A similar question had been addressed by Jesus to His disciples: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Mt 16:13) Apart from St Peter, who recognized Him as the Christ, the disciples answered: “John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

The crowd too, who is welcoming Jesus with royal honours and gifts, is stepping aside: “In fact, this is just Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth!” If Jerusalem fears for the ‘establishment’, the crowd is starting to realize that following a non-violent king is not so easy.

‘Non-violent’ does not mean submissive: on the Cross, Jesus will respond to the blasphemous shouts of the people wanting Him to be crucified with God’s royal answer: service. “Let His blood be on us and on our children!” (Mt 27:25) In a paradoxical way, this will fulfil Moses’ covenant, when spilled blood used to seal the covenant (Ex 24:4-8). Man’s violence is transformed by the Anointed One of the Lord, by the meekness of the Man-God, by His incarnate life (symbolized by blood), into a channel of communion, into a new covenant, into a nuptial pact with all those who are rejecting Him (Mt 26:28). On the Cross, in a hidden way,

in the midst of mockery, the power of love will overcome hate, and make it inoffensive from within, creating all the conditions for a new world, and for the Messianic peace proclaimed by Jesus while entering the Holy City.

2. Meditatio

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

- What if we were a cloak? What if we were a donkey? At times we regard ourselves as meek peace makers. In fact, it is evident that our hearts are full of neither peace nor meekness.

- We are consoled when we think that, like the donkey, we bear the burden of a peace that has already been fulfilled by Christ: we bear the burden, we bear the King of Peace in our hearts in turmoil; we bear the King of Peace so that, through our slow advancement on His path, He may finally enter our Jerusalem, in the Jerusalem of this world. Yes, the peace is a good that has been entrusted to us: we are not capable of fulfilling it; it has been given to us as a royal gift, as nuptial communion.

- In spite of our worries, how much is Jesus, the meek King of peace, shedding light on our own humanity? Perhaps, inasmuch as He does not show us a simple icon of non-violence or pacifism. He is prompting us to go beyond that, to search for the hidden, unarmed power of the Lord, in the wounded mankind, in human history which is inevitably full of violence. Which kind of gaze must we have when we enter Jerusalem, the place of conflict? As in the Cross, in the conflict, a new world is groaning and secretly emerging... God's life never stops flowing. Meekness should become a profession of faith in love, never stopping working, especially when it is hindered. Meekness should become our way of living our lives in human history, always remembering that fulfilment is still to come, but with the hands of a midwife, always helping the messianic gift, the fruit of Christ's Passover, come to life.

From the 'Letter of a parish priest to a Camorrist brother' by Fr Maurice Patriciello

Who is a Camorrist? A brother. Someone who, unfortunately, is like a wolf to other people. He humiliates them, he oppresses them, he 'eats' them, he kills them...

What is the Gospel? A wonderful and inimitable proclamation of salvation, freedom, renewed dignity. Of love for all, camorrist included. The Christian man receives and proclaims those wounding Words that no one before was so brave to utter. Words that have seduced him, made of him a joyful 'prisoner'.

To those Words he decided to commit his life. Evil is a chameleon. It hides itself, it transforms itself, it changes skin and colours...

And what about evil that does become a menace for us? I am not pleased, but I keep on treading my path. Faith in Jesus Christ, a thirst for justice, truth, dignity, are our second skin. We are struggling. The fight between good and evil is ancient. Each one of us is called to fight. Unfortunately, as a true illusionist, evil is fascinating us. A mermaid first bewitching us, then devouring us. The desire to do good, on the contrary, does not shout, it whispers. It does not make you feel dizzy, then pushes you down from the rock. On the contrary, it gives you beautiful, strong, long-lasting peace.

Those imprisoned by evil, in order to reach their targets, defile, soil, terrorize, kill. Lovers of the good, on the contrary, love even those who are crushing that very good under their feet. And they are able to distinguish between the 'wheat' of the person and the 'darnel' of his actions.

A paradox is that all those who are busy doing good, work to the benefit of their adversaries, and of their children, and of their families too.

You are killing me... I love you in return. You would like to oppress me... I fight for your rights. You are paying for your crimes in prison... I come to visit you and help your children that you had to abandon because of your evilness. You put a bomb at the entrance of my church to scare me... I pray for you and your family. Here it is, brother camorrist, the man that you intend to scare: a poor priest, enamoured of Jesus Christ, of His Church, of his vocation. A poor priest, but stubborn, who is not resigned to bless the white coffins of the young people whose lives have been ruined by you.

You know everything: my name, my surname, my date of birth – you did not forget my birthday – my address. You know that every evening, in winter, in summer, you can see me at the Altar. If you want to hurt me, it will be very easy. But why should you do that?

A priest, raising his arms to implore mercy from the Lord, is the most fragile man in the world. But – never forget that – also the strongest. You would be a coward. I am aware that you are fond of me – in your own way – and you told me so so many times. However, you cannot understand my stubbornness in minding your business which – in your view – is none of my business.

I know – you have written that to me – that in prison you speak well of me. "But..." there is something that you cannot accept. Therefore, we should discuss on that objection. Give me your hand. Let us make peace. Do not fool me though. Be aware that the Church you were baptized in, keeps on loving you. And she keeps hoping that you get to goodness. Her greatest joy would be to see you free, an honest man, kneeling at the feet of the Cross and asking forgiveness for what you have done. A wishful thinking? Why?

I am expecting your conversion, camorrist brother. I keep on hoping for that. I am fond of you, I long for your good and the good of all our people. I pray, please try loving me in your turn. Do not hurt anybody; do not hurt yourself; do not hurt me, if you can.

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

The donkeys' prayer

*Lord, please grant us to be down-to-earth,
and to keep our ears open so that they can listen to Heaven,
and never lose a word of Your Word.
Please grant us a brave back,
so that we can put up with the most unbearable human beings.
Please grant us to walk straight,
despising flattery and avoiding lashing.
Please grant us to be deaf to insults, ingratitude...
That is the only kind of deafness we wish for.
We do not ask You to prevent all of our foolishness,
because a donkey will always do something foolish.
Please grant us Lord, to never despair
of Your mercy which is so gratuitous
for those wretched donkeys that we are,
as those poor human beings define us,
given that they have not understood anything either of donkeys or of You,
who flew to Egypt with one of our brothers,
and who made Your prophetic entry into Jerusalem
on the back of one of us.*

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

Let us be conquered by the infinite possibilities that the gift of meekness has, to make all our lives royal, and, as baptised people, decked with the three 'munera' ('gifts') of King, Priest and Prophet, to give praise to the Lord of history.

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

Let us share the fruit of the Lectio.